

Jael Under Glass

{A Tale of a Sister Earth}

by
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Introduction

I have an abiding hatred of utopias.

There is something about the idea of the ideal state which terrifies me. There is something of the maze in the thought of it, of reaching that final chamber beyond which no one can go further for by going further it implies there is further still to go.

The dystopia in comparison seems oddly less cruel.

No dystopia after all ever survives its own baptism. No regime, no damnation ever endures beyond itself. Even should a remnant survive when the dystopia is crumbled into itself like a cinder those that remain do not do so to praise what was but to condemn it.

A dystopia is whatever is against the order of a loving human being who lacks the cruelty to be unhuman in themselves.

A utopia in comparison creates the illusion that *if only* such an idea or religious faith or theory or belief were to permeate all life there need never be anything after this equation is written into the human psyche or soul.

The utopia is without pain or cruelty or suffering where life has become an utter, solitary ideal. It is an ordered heaven, a pristine crystalline Eden of a kind. Yet nothing can be closer to it than hell.

For nothing can be gained after its attainment. Give one faith that even in the depths of the dystopic eventually there is an end, eventually even the most horrific of evils succumb to, if nothing else, old age.

Of countless litanies toward tyrants and incompetent bureaucracies and hypocritical leaders, of religious figures who secretly despise the gods they claim to worship and a human populace always on the cusp of insanity hope remains.

The greater the flaw the greater the potential for it to be overcome.

If one knows that there is always the potential for evil, if one is inoculated against the naive ignorance of a perfect life this then retains the seeds of a better life to come.

In the upswing of millennia though our potential for greater destruction remains our common sense likewise has grown. At no other time in our history have we been able to kill the Earth so completely and yet violence has receded from its shores so completely as it has now.

The greater our potential to be demons is irrevocably bound to our potential to be better than we were. It is out of a knowledge of hell that we have embarked upon the avoidance of it.

Not so the utopia.

If one reaches perfection, it is not the limitless expanse of forever one perceives but the closed prison of a single room left pristinely neat and clean without any opportunity even to do so much as make an error in it.

The dropping of a pen to the floor accidentally becomes identical to the blood sun remaining stationary in the sky. It simply doesn't happen here. A single less-than-perfect day becomes cause to fear and should another suffer those in their perfection cannot love this individual but must be shorn of them, like cancerous skin taken from a wound.

And in this fixed state how can one understand all those less-than-perfect ones we are? For it is not enough merely to be, one must instead be an example unattainable to all others and how we can emulate these perfect souls, lifting mankind to this pinnacle as a result?

In the utopia, the primary goal is not merely to show a better place but a place incapable of being other than ideal, a country meant to mock our own failures, to condescendingly ask why we have not reached the heaven another has claimed to be within our reach even when the abyss between the actual and the

ideal is too far for anyone to cross.

Utopia is the blunt instrument of one too afraid to admit failure is the price of being human. It is the expectation of something outside of reality and the demands that what is believed to be should equal what is.

Instead, all life is merely the act of movement, perhaps towards something, perhaps away from something.

But it never ceases.

When one pens a hell, they are trying to show in the fewest possible moves an evil and how that evil will affect mankind for evil is the fulcrum by which all narrative begins.

When one pens a heaven, they are doing the selfsame thing since the lack of movement itself is evil and the conviction that one can merely stop somewhere in the labyrinth of their life and claim this time more worthy than another is as great a darkness as any hatred nested upon one's soul.

Yet the utopia retains its appeal like heaven retains its own for it is the context by which each life is weighed. So long as it remains "out there," either beyond death or beyond the physical it can seem tempting, even alluring, but its danger is likewise ever-present.

A utopia must balance all needs against all wants against all desires in such a way as to leave no room for animosity, hatred, boredom or fear. It must state unequivocally that all answers to the human condition have been solved, that there is no longer even the potential for one to find fault with anything in it, even the souls of others or the lives that other people lead.

After this, it must further state that nothing new can be added, neither a flaw nor even a further perfection for to apply improvement is to imply the utopia is not.

Yet life is not a series of perfections, it is the act of reaching merely the closest one can to the best option one has at the time when they had no better choice yet had to make it.

That's all we get.

It is perhaps the finest blessing one can hope for since this is an equal fate for us all. No king has ever achieved the divinity of a perfect day, nor beggar. No one can claim with utter sincerity theirs was the perfect life. We should not strive for the perfect but for the good for the good can always be improved upon while the perfect always remains dead.

In seeking life, one must not forget life is an action meant to be done.

Second Introduction

*Wasps born on the underside of the desert
think the idea of flying is a mental illness.*

I have an abiding hope for dystopias. Not because I believe they are good but because I believe they will end. A utopia after all must not merely be perfect but perfect in all times, in all places, for all peoples. A dystopia in comparison need only cause one to suffer for it to exist and exists only because even one despises it.

Yet there is hope in that, a greater hope than most realize. For the dystopia exists to end. It is the period at the end of a sentence no matter how badly constructed and is meant to be only a product of its own time and place, circumscribed by whatever will come after it.

The dystopia ends the moment one accepts themselves as human, realizes their flaws, accepts them, realizes the world's imperfections and accepts them too or tries to change their worlds for the better.

A utopia instead is to remain fixed in stone, fermenting a human life into blissful extinction, hammering away at all supposed imperfections till nothing human is left. Utopias are the impossible Edens laid out by impossible gods never meant to be touched or rendered unclean by the living occupying their borders.

Dystopias instead are merely dragons anyone can slay.

For this reason, hope remains since to be in hell is preferable in wishing to escape than remaining in Eden never knowing the prison walls are there.

Imagine this broken world it seems is peopled also of giants, all seemingly invisible and all-powerful directing us toward lives we did not intend, making us feel the weight of ourselves displaced, leaving mankind as small pathetic things

impotently striking at those who would wound us constantly.
And it seems too often they never feel the sting.

However, I have often observed even giants can be felled
by insects if aimed at the right place. The wasp hopes to fell a
giant in their day. So too ourselves, I pray.

Prologue
(Women as language)

1) They had a house built of crystal by a lake of amethyst and everyday Utsarxaos could be seen tending the flesh-gardens as they palely waited for his touch.

The house had been formed of a single quartz devoured by parasite-eaters and pyrovore-orchids who had shaped all according to the will of those who occupied it now.

Xenxes was seen often in those days as well.

Were there a calendar the year would have remained indescribable. The human sun had died and with it had gone great portions of the galaxy, leaving in their wake new shores to set new feet upon. Or whatever life in that future time imagined feet to be.

The history of a billion years to beings of this age seemed as simple as the passing of a summer afternoon. And the history of an empire or of a world merely laid upon those obsidian books of theirs, squat and small and lasting as of moments, or less.

The planet had a name once but the name was lost.

Out of the lich-language of forever whatever had once clothed ocean and sky and continent had evaporated as flesh in the furnace or the storm.

The man was tending the garden again. The woman was in the house again. And across in another house were other men and other women. Ordinary as a summer day in wintertime.

The gardens sang then. He felt them singing. He spread his hand among them, tending them, listening to them listening to him.

In times before what had they been?

In times to come what were they meant to be?

None answered either way.

He could not tell them since he did not know and they

could not tell him for the same reason. It was the only communion they had one with another, not knowing the day to come.

By the lake of amethyst waters he waited, as if this were the purpose of forever.

Tending the garden.

2) At night sometimes he would take the book from its place and begin to read. Passing his touch along obsidian pages he would attempt to glance behind him at the centuries which were but he knew each day that they passed through we locked behind ourselves, as he had done.

The lich-language whispered into him and through him.

He imagined, if seen far enough in the past, one might stride alongside gods. Though what that word meant now was harder to explain.

He tried to narrow his sight to a single line but that single runic scrawl contained the history of five planets or more and all that lay within their shores and all that ever would.

He read again. He read again.

He tried to envision it, knowing it was nothing but a moment in time. He tried to envision a glass-invisible scorpion upon a grass sea or perhaps a winged daughter of some false memory or beasts, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste who ruled upon that small and fragile dominion . . . but the thought once imagined would not hold and passed like some tattered wraith slowly pierced along the grass.

Glancing out he imagined it, grass the colour of chalk or glass but then those words like chalk or glass faded from his conception and he knew no more what they meant than one would know how best to describe a black-snow child or a white-shadow star.

His wife came, shattering further the remembrance, asking him nothing important, he sitting upon his chair with all the

worlds beyond glittering like serpents' scales in the gold-brilliant night of stars like the endless ocean of a universe never-ending.

Answering her without even knowing what words he answered her he turned back to his reading, turning another page.

3) The bulbs of flowers like scorpion tails rustled in the crystalline winds. The green sun retired behind clouds of silver and was still. Utsarxaos could hear the sun singing, and solar radiation burning symphonies into his skin. In the distant past one of his ancestors had been a scorpion herself, an invisible thing sailing the grass seas of a foreign shore. Now he too could feel the sun vibrate the strand of itself against him.

Within the house, she waited and they ate quietly together. Each was a myriad of things that came and collapsed into one shape, one form. Part of them were human and parts of them were quite otherwise.

In his perception of her, she was a woman.

In her perception of him, he was a man.

But gazing from a point far distant in the past they were as alien and incomprehensible as an unknown colour or a word never heard, never thought of, never imagined.

They had hands of course, and eyes. But the word "hand" or "eye," what did they mean now? Had his hands fingers? Had he arms? He had shape yes but his ancestors were scorpions, were caddisfly women, were winged children of greater or lesser deities and five-eyed worshippers whose first awakening to consciousness had happened before Earth cooled.

He was a man and she a woman but this did not make either of them human. If seen from a point in the past when men and women conceived of hands as hands, of eyes as eyes then he would be a blasphemy. So would she.

They spoke quietly a time, savouring the meal. Today, another portion of the garden shifted into a feast. One or two of

them had whimpered but been stilled when she had sloughed off the memories of their former lives, leaving them only aware of now and being only aware of now, the fire as it ate and tore at them seemed a normal thing as if they had always been on fire and pain no more a torture than any other ordinary day.

Even in death now, even feeling their skin smoking like charred armour on a battlefield knowing nothing other than this they were content.

The pair ate quietly, having little else to say.

Once they had been happy perhaps. Were they happy now?

Some of their ancestors were happy. This the man reasoned but only because he was not completely sure and it was better to imagine what he did not know was better than what he was now.

They were married though the word too had shifted meaning over time. Once it referred to the idea of two people together but now there was no concept of union in the former ideal.

She held the right to mingle in the skin of another, either man or woman as she wished. Perhaps tonight she would go to Ialhria-Iria or Talrique and blend skin-to-skin with them. She would dissolve herself into one or the other and cease to be, rendered slave or master or both, transforming them into her, her into them.

She could not hope for his jealousy anymore. Had he ever been jealous of her? Was this what she wished? No. This word too eluded meaning now.

Of course, the dominion of their kind was not merely single or solitary.

Theirs was now a multitude of worlds and worlds' skins. Over time they evolved, perfecting themselves as they went.

Their realm extended across uncounted planets allowing

them an infinite escape of form. It was now impossible for life to adapt merely to former things. Each being could with a gesture tailor themselves, revisit old epochs, stretch taunt a century over their bodies, and revert to something new by becoming something old.

Only the future eluded them. Not the past.

All the spheres of creation upon which their kind walked or crawled or swam or flew or sang were rendered paradise by its infinite potential. Or so it was reasoned. Yet never was it truly believed.

She could not hope for his jealousy anymore. Had he ever been jealous of her? Was this what she wished?

Yes.

Tonight, she could crawl into the flesh of Ialhria-lria and make some mocking gesture to him. Or he could likewise do something similar to her.

It was impossible of course. There should have been by now something more to escape this cancerous thought. Words had shifted meaning and hands had shifted the shapes of hands and eyes the shapes of eyes.

They were sans pain, sans agony and their realms sans violence. Yet.

He rose from the table and went back into the garden, she waiting at the table lusting and allowing old lusts to take on familiar, half-forgotten dimensions.

In the garden, the flowers sang or screamed.

Once an eternity ago their kind had watched mankind blister or burn or fail or fall. Now they had evolved into this just as his kind had evolved into whatever they were now.

Should it not have been perfect by this time? Should not the pain of living end, to be replaced by something better?

He was a man though he was not human.

And they were even less than he.

Somewhere an orgy was beginning. Somewhere lovers were spent of lovemaking. Somewhere a child was ignoring all save her own sad games, made in the thoughts of being no more than a child.

Were they not gods by now? Were they not creatures of myth? Had not all things descended to them by now?

Quietly she came into the garden and sat beside him. She mentioned she was leaving.

He mentioned knowing he could say nothing to stop her.

Far away perhaps some rough missionary was laying bare their gospel upon another foreign shore, mentioning the need for change and hope even in their martyrdom, for even imbued of all they were death herself remained the ultimate truth of change.

She rose and went to leave, going to either Ialhria-Iria or Talrique. He watched her go, saying not a word.

At his disposal were all the power of a god if viewed from outside the century and eon of his own. If seen from without the confines of that year the ground was pristine as if touched by Eden's own and the lake, the house, even the sky closer to heaven than heaven itself and he despite his alien form untouched by disease or old age or ailment of any familiar kind.

But from his perspective he was but an ordinary man watching the love of his life slip away and the language of her impossible to comprehend, some rough symmetry of error, some equation . . . some wound impossible to close.

He could have risen up and violently tried to stop her.

But that would have proven nothing.

So, he merely gazed at the garden and listened to the living singing as if singing with the dead.

Second Prologue

It was the last day of the war.

It was the first day of history.

The city stank of fat burning.

The city started breathing.

The city died in fire.

The city died screaming.

How many lives can a person count before they break?

How many dead does it take to weigh upon the living? Never ask and never answer unless there is some hope in either. If you ask how many died do you want the answer? If you answer how many died did you ever want to hear the question?

What is left for people to pick up after all is ended?

Themselves, themselves, and only them. For this reason, heaven is mended and whispered of and twisted to a thousand shapes of our invention . . .

Chapter 1

The dragon in the desert

In the distance, one could see something burning. The strginalos had woken by this time. They could only speak in fire and spent their days wandering the inner deserts, talking to themselves, making litanies which turned dunes to glass.

Two pillars of fire were blazing though. A conversation was forming, scrawling heat along the air, messages of love or war. Of course, since fire was their only language it hardly mattered what they said. Tragedy would always result for any who were not them.

Had the city eyes then it would have seen.

Had the street sensation it could have felt the heat pouring from the lowlands upward into it, piercing past the walls.

Instead, it seemed the city of the dead was lifeless.

It seemed . . .

The streets tautly stretched themselves across the stone beneath, reclining. Buildings squat like venomous toads marched forward and back, inches at a time in the acidic winds.

In all directions, falling from the flattened hill where its body lay the lowlands spread, crawling away from it as if crouching in some subconscious fear. If one could imagine earth or sand as a living thing, a beast stalking a jungle, if one could imagine pigeons haunted by the lamplight of grey midnight cities sputtering into the dark at the sound of a gun or a scream well then one might imagine the countryside winnowing away now, gazing at the city of the dead in dread, sightlessly.

Then came the sound of wings . . .

*I stare at the page I've just written, not certain where to go next. I glance at the title. *The dragon in the desert*. It's a good*

opening, something vaguely exotic to draw the reader in.

And a city of the dead. How can one go wrong with a city of the dead?

Where did I go wrong?

I'm not certain anymore.

I look at the other openings in the chapter. I've made dozens. Hijraelis is added to some but not others. I continue reading.

Transparent ice-veined wings approached and attached to them a body and attached to the body a name. Hijraelis. It is important to recognize such details, wings separate and yet connected, sloping to the realization of flesh, sloping further to the realization of speech.

A white translucent body then, legs and arms thin as the branches of nonexistent bone trees, two large sapphire eyes bulging from a flattened face and a thin slit mouth vertically opening and closing in her effort to fly.

She came, entering the maw-gate of the city, and waited.

History began here, so some claimed.

This expanse of stone, walls rising like titans into the clouds, walls grey as parchment or dark as armour and only the maw-gate an opening, a wound.

She came for no others came.

The city of the dead was not permitted entrance yet likewise was it never felled. Since none were allowed here so too it was never allowed to be destroyed. As such, though it was meant as forbidden it was sought out, though only she remained to seek it.

There were others of course, whole countries beyond the shallow sea and her people remained to the east, to their temples dedicated to those of Yvragraine and Sbtharthyl, but there no longer lingered a hunger for this mausoleum place. At some point during the last season, most of those who had secretly journeyed west lost something upon their return and would not leave again.

Only she remained to perform the profane rites.

She entered.

The maw-gate loomed like a half-formed mouth, beyond it streets bled in six directions like the veins or arteries of an arm.

The buildings were stout, thick walls which jutted at odd angles making misshapen piles of cubes reaching skyward, each shorter than the last till at the very top there seemed nothing at all.

Each cube rotated adjacent to the former, shifting out of sync with whatever came below it.

Hijraelis marvelled at the madness of such construction and then went further into the city.

Her feet carried her ever forward, thin splinters of toes the colour of snow and she heard from the empty streets the howl.

This howl had been written of. It rose like a scream then flattened out, broadening into something unnatural. It was the sound the dead made when new births shone forth, the sound the grey galgeirim made, those armoured beetles who died first and then gave birth, their skin cracking into sounds the same as this.

Being familiar with such a sound she wandered on. Neither the dead nor the living gave her pause or cause for fear.

After 108 steps she stopped. There was the temple spoken of by former exiles to this place. A great ziggurat rose, a mountain slowly ascending into a hill.

The pyramidal base loomed so far before her she would not perceive it while the steps lifted upward, the base shorn at regular intervals cut steeper and steeper into themselves till it too reached a point high above where it was nothing at all.

Some in coming here took the steps and found the door halfway between the sky and the world. Into this crypt, something happened, what? no one could say. The words were written but not understood.

Hijraelis decided she could merely return this way and take the steps then. Onward she went to the city's heart.

In other versions of course it all happens differently. Sometimes it is a man, other times another woman, and sometimes a dragon really is in this chapter. But so far, all attempts have failed.

The howl stopped by now.

Where it came from, she did not know, and where it passed into she could not tell.

The buildings led into great plazas and gardens where flowers were black as ochre or obsidian weeping.

Bending to gaze at a single rose she heard it weeping still.

Quietly she prayed to those of Yvragraine and continued on her way, her feet clicking acid-wise against the ground.

The heart remained to be seen where all had seen it still.

The weeping continued in her perception but then slowly faded away. She had a half-thought to turn the flowers to ashes, to burn them all away, but couldn't. Something held her hand and her speech was not of flame.

The heart was simply a house. This too had been written of. The house was not like the city at all having windows and being all of a single shape with a sloped roof descending from the apex in two directions and a door made not of stone.

In the writings, it was clear something was supposed to happen here.

As she approached, she heard a final thing. It was a roar, something harsh and reptilian, and knowing it was reminded of those bones upon far Kor Korak, bones which dwarfed her kind and seemed unnatural in their way.

She entered, pushing the door not made of stone, crossing the threshold as she felt winter assail her soul . . .

I am growing tired of this game, of fixing these beads along a string, of making sense of impossible things.

I toss the papers to the kitchen table and fix myself a sandwich.

It tastes tasteless and I realize all I have is bread.

I glance back to Hijraelis but she is not really there.

And I am growing tired of sculpting out of air.

Damn. That wasn't bad.

I get a notebook and write down the last couple of sentences. Maybe turn my own words into a poem. Or two. Certainly one.

But what I am going to do?

I write that down as well and eat my unfinished sandwich.

In twenty minutes, I'll have to go to work.

My job consists mostly of editing people's lives. As a joke, my employer left a dystopian novel on my desk implying our task to be as morally corrupt as theirs.

But the editing process is not meant to erase lives but to crystalize them into something explainable.

Let me explain.

Our country went through a war. This happens. And out of this war, we lost a great deal. Some believe we lost our souls. I do not think we ever had souls so there was nothing for us to lose.

The state during the war killed millions and losing the war has rendered us bankrupt in many ways, though not in all ways. The victors of the war dictated terms, one of which was the position I have now. Which we have now.

There is an entire building, squat like a venomous toad where we go, and I am on the 18th floor, sitting beside a thousand other men and women in little cubicles spending our days reading the intimate details of other people's lives.

Diaries usually. It's amazing what you can find when they aren't around anymore to stop you.

So, we take these documents and all the other minutia the

government already has and photographs, personal essays, pornography collections, prison records, and charitable acts and we construct a person's entire life, birth to death, smoothing away any of the uncertainties about them until there are no uncertainties left.

That's how we edit a life.

Take this one guy. A politician before the war. I have his letters, I have his mistresses' letters, (plural,) and I have his journal in which he described raping his daughter.

I can with pinpoint accuracy detail his sexual life, his crimes, and his deceptions.

Our politician also was against the war, a champion of the common man, a sentiment which was as genuine as a politician can have, and despite being a rapist committed no other crimes.

Does this render him good? No.

Does this make him a monster? No.

But it does make him human.

That's the duty and purpose of our work here.

I have a catalogue of the dead, of each civilian casualty during the war. 11,946,234. I know the names of barely five hundred. But I know the lives of all of them.

During the war they were considered less than human, placed in camps which were set alight before our country's defeat. Our penalty, enacted by the victors, was for us to never forget, to be here a sculptor of each dead man, woman, and child and of the living too, if we are able.

After we review all the details we make our reports, everything from their favourite colours to their worst sins to their finest moments. We omit nothing. We do not shape their lives by removing pieces from them, we organize them into single documents, the Bible of Jihan or Sam Thistle or Maegra or Thomisin.

Sam Thistle. I had almost wanted to forget him.

I had wanted to forget him because I knew him so well, another of our band of poets from before the war. I have his whole life in my hand right here, another red book with the gold-leafed words on the cover. But once the life is written to its full it is taken from our hands and placed in the vault while carbon copies of everything are transcribed and given to our enemies, and ourselves.

By ourselves I do not mean editors, I mean leaders, remaining families of the dead, people who need to be reminded constantly of the cost, etc.

For us when life is smoothed to a pristine polish and no secrets are left it is taken from our hands forever.

I had almost wanted to forget.

"Have you eaten yet?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you eaten yet Carnoton?"

"No, I'm just narrating my own story."

"Well narrate more after lunch. You're no good to me hungry."

"Is there anything you'd want to say to the person reading this book right now?"

"Yes," my boss says, staring at me. "Books are well and good but they aren't everything. Especially when you're hungry. Deal with the rest of your story after lunch."

For obvious reasons, I won't tell you about my lunch or where I went. Just imagine I had something tastier than bread and the cafeteria was not grey or cold or pathetically dim and did not reek of desperate women and desperate men.

After lunch, I worked a few more hours. My desk was covered in hundreds of pages all detailing a young woman's life this time. Her name was Jael Isih. An obvious anagram for Hijraelis. Not sure why I even bothered with that detail. I could

always make up names without any difficulty.

Our Miss Isih had died in the siege of Traija during the last months of the war. She had no diary but was instead a poet, like myself. As such all I had to work from was her poetry.

One, or rather the pieces of one I spent time on, gazing down at intently.

Mufisdoon, A Uluma

*There is an islands in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand,
and in the garden beside salt seas
dreamers recline who will not
sleep nor understand,
gazing only always into the waters
beneath bone trees.*

*Women have insect ink etched along their faces
there, where a kite the colour of wine races
empty skies, gazing at the roads like leaves
scattering into themselves, where all walk together, spaces
left only for the grieving . . . she grieves.*

*II. The country spins on forever, world of bridges and of spires,
towers to God or silences, though God is silence here.
They are the people of the towers, harvesters of salt
which allows relief, to forget sand and heat, perhaps
forget themselves, retire their own sins or skins as silences, (let) lapse
names, lapse faces, lapse masks. At last the fault
is gone, the world is gone except the shadow of a misspent year,
save the seasons of the feasts, and the fires.*

III. Rebels brood in typhoid winters of heat.

*She broods. Where the bone-eaters eat,
where the plague drinkers drink
she thinks upon the tyrant in his tower, complete,
while she starves in his glances . . . they thirst.*

*Typhoid winter comes where deserts cool,
where salt to ocean is or shadows pool
into wine they drink, to forget,
to forget all else save their thirst, jewel
of consciousness begging to die, not yet.*

*IV. It is not always so. Deserts in winter
grew, in dreams in dreams the word
salt does not exist, nor hunger nor thirst.
The rebel is no rebel there, where heaven births
herself. What is there to rebel against, mirths'
laughter of no taint of fear? They are cursed
only here, in empty countries of heard
only by mad prophets swimming the air, wine bitter.*

A second attempt was obviously made.

Mufisdoon, A Tsuarya

*There is an island in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand.
And in the garden beside waters of salt they stand.
Dreamers recline neath bone salt trees winter cast,
gazing only always into the water beneath bone trees, and
where their eyes have led, they follow carelessly.*

*Women wear insect ink tattooed about their eyes, those last
daughters of a final god dimly remembered if at all, last*

*sons beside them gazing into infinity. Past
becomes its own country now. The day to come a lonely
unglimpsed shore. What is it all for I wonder, sand
seas and an island, temples to nameless gods, passed
in unfelt monuments sand worn? Yet beneath bone trees
they watch, reclining into dreamless dreams, the only
children left, remnant of humanity. Remnant of . . . humanity.*

"Emoty countries?"

I glance up to see Moriea Crave standing over me.

"Yes, I noticed that too. Should be empty."

Crave is our liaison with the enemy. After losing the war several members of the victorious society decided to immigrate into our lands to keep an eye on us.

Such as Crave here.

I was not even certain if Crave was her real name . . .

"It actually is my real name."

"It is?"

"Quite real. I come from a long line of Cravings."

"Oh, my mistake then."

I would check on her name later, just to be sure.

"Good idea. Now, what are we going to do about these poems?"

"Do?"

"Do."

"I don't understand the question."

"Look at the date."

Ah.

"Yes, I see it now."

The poems had been made on the day of her death. I had already seen enough of her work to know this was not her best quality. The line lengths were irregular, she had made awkward use of the rhyme scheme, and overall it was clear these were early

drafts of something she had been working on the very day she died.

"What would you have me do? *Exactly* have me do? I do want to be sure."

"Edit the poems of course."

"The poems are what they are Miss Crave. They are an accurate representation of her mind at the time of her death. I don't see editing the poems as mattering."

"But I do. At some point, it will not be enough simply to record who they were Carnoton. It may become necessary to record who they could have been. My government has informed me of an experiment we are conducting on this very question. And, considering your skills, considerable skills," she added ingratiatingly, "I believe you to be the man for this particular job. And I am not being ingratiating. I am trying to be polite."

I was going to say try harder but I didn't.

Knowing she could have made a statement about my thoughts she thought better of it and went on her way, leaving me with the question of what to do with Jael Isih's poetry.

"Is that why I chose your name? Because we were fated to meet? I can't believe the universe is that badly run on coincidence."

"Believe it!" Crave said from her office in the corner. "And get to work!"

I turned my attention to the task at hand, denying myself the pleasure of saying no. As if I had a choice anyway.

After the day was over, I took carbon copies of the poems with me and went to the nearest pub. I sat down in my usual seat in the corner listening to other writers of the city ply their wares.

Before the war, this had been *Ale's House*. Actually, it had been *Eel's House* but everyone called it Ale. There was supposed to be some complex joke or pun behind it but frankly, it seemed

ridiculous . . .

"It's not ridiculous at all."

"Come again?"

"Used to be owned by old Henry Eel so we'd call it *Eel's Place*. When he went into politics, he had his own house now so *Eel's House* was born. After he died, the new owner didn't want to change the name exactly, to wash out all the nostalgia, but he didn't want to call his place after a fish. Considering how much ale we sell seemed simple."

"You know could have been called that from the beginning Cedy. It seems like a long, pointless route."

"Carn my boy, you just described politics."

And with that Cedyric left, leaving behind a cup of ale with a picture of an eel on the glass.

I drank it and then tried to listen to the others for a time.

Since the end of the war fiction had become the new currency and writers like myself were the new bankers. Damn, that sounds stupid.

Can I try again?

Since the end of the war . . . conclusion of the war? Yeah, conclusion of the war, the role of fiction had grown, allowing most people the chance to deal with things that had been hidden before. And this in turn made a good story into the proper currency of the state. One would have imagined this would make stories circumscribed, but no. Since the victors of the last battle had no such censorship we could say anything.

Have a listen.

"Are you now or have you ever been . . .?"

The house had sped away, leaving only a bed. The bed had softened against her features leaving an imprint of herself when she left it, sliding her feet over the side feeling the cold hard plastic of the floor slowly warm itself at the touch of her.

The phrase repeated.

She turned to look at the bed, at the snow-soft features, at the pillow which curled like wings newly formed from out a chrysalis.

She stood, feeling the weight of her body press down against herself.

The city was still in her head and the world. No, worlds. No, more. She made a silent prayer to those of Yvragraine and took a step. Then another. The room revealed itself an inch at a time.

The winter shade of the floor and walls was the same, behind her beyond the bed a window, and beyond the window a city.

She moved her legs slowly, letting herself feel those feet which were not her feet at all. Gazing at her hand it was not her hand. Had too many fingers.

Circling the bed she went to the window. The city beyond was not her city, nor the city of the dead.

It was squat but not misshapen. The buildings were only a few storeys high coloured neither bright nor grey but white, green, red, and blue.

Below the window she gazed to see a street below, not the streets of the city of the dead nor the streets of her people, for these were broad and grey and sloughed along the ground like maggots . . . she caught herself in hearing this new word.

Then at the perfectly wrong moment, the trick of the sun occurred and the window became briefly a mirror and she was caught staring at herself.

Naked body but soft with extra layers and eyes too small and a mouth positioned like the horizon which was not her mouth at all and fingers ending in limbs which only bent slightly and breasts and skin which could be cut not shattered and . . .

A new word entered her consciousness.

Breasts.

Thinking back another word emerged. Beetle. She had said this, speaking of the galgeirim but the word she had used, beetle, had no

meaning before.

Now she understood it. The image of a rounded creature emerged in her mind, six legs and a pair of mandibles jutting forward, black eyes glistening in the sun beneath the stems of ancient plants as transparent as her former self.

The phrase came to her again.

Turning in disgust from her reflection she examined the room.

"What do you think?"

I glance up to see Sam Thistle staring at me. Being dead I should be surprised. Maybe in some versions of this tale, I am.

"I've heard better. Have a seat."

Sam rests on the chair in front of me, his red hair shaking slightly as he bobs his head forward and back, an almost reptilian gesture.

"Heard better huh?"

The writer, on stage before his audience, continues talking.

"That name, Yvragraine. What does it mean?" Thistle asks.

"It's a mythical place, home of a race of beings who have never known conflict. Race of birdlike creatures who exist in a state of grace, an Eden which never fell."

"Sounds boring."

"Well later on some left, settling in a place called Sbtharthyl where they were free to indulge in violence, death, deception."

"Sounds better."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? So why are you here?"

"Just going throughout the world, visiting old graves. You remember Parajra?"

"Yeah. I have her dossier. Just finishing it."

"I remember her. Sometimes I've even seen her visiting that brothel she used during the war. Facade they used to hide their true intentions."

Parajra had been a spy. I'd only now reached the point where I was certain whether she had spied for our side or theirs.

Whichever one it was I'm not telling you.

"Anyone else you've seen?"

"Few soldiers who can't remember the war is over. Few lovers in bombed-out shelters who can't tell it's over."

"And you? Do you know it's over?"

"Oh, I knew before I died. You remember that riverside, us watching them bathing?"

"Yeah."

"Two or three of those slips of girls are on my side now, still at the same river, still bathing, looking for us but now we aren't there anymore. Finally convinced one of them it was time to move on. The other two will pass away in time. Fade. It's how the world works. You can't put a life into a page."

"Ah. Is that why you're here? To dissuade me from pinning you like all the other little moths, under glass?"

"Something like that. Well in my case anyway. Not in hers."

"Hers?"

Hers.

As we were talking, I hadn't noticed the young woman. She was a small petite thing walking between rows of men who stank of ale, (or eel, no, ale,) and until she sat, I was only vaguely aware of her.

Now that she sat beside Sam's left side, seeing her full in the face I knew.

It was Jael.

"I believe you've already met, so to speak."

"Miss Isih," I say.

"Carnoton," she says.

"Our Miss Isih noticed you were given an interesting challenge today."

"Yes, I was told to edit your last poem, and make it into something better."

"Well, most of us faded souls don't really care what is said about us. I care because you know me, knew me, and since I went native on the other side of the world, fighting the good bad fight here, family back home thinking me a monster I don't want to be remembered that much. Rather just be forgotten."

"Most would rather flip a coin and figure out posterity that way."

"But Miss Isih is different. The idea that someone will revisit her last attempt, the last chance to make something right. It's too tempting. So here she is. Your muse."

"Pleased to meet you," she says.

"My muse?"

"Muse. Inspiration. Companion. Hallucination. Take your pick. After all, depending upon the story the logic of this may make you simply insane, or maybe in this world the dead do come back, or we're just figments of your imagination and when the tale ends, you'll go back to sane again."

"What are you going to do during this time, Sam?"

"Visit old brothels I can't enjoy. Walk across the ocean, and see my family one last time even if they can't see me. Or maybe they can, or will. Or go to the camps and weep for forty days. Never knew until it was too late what those f . . ."

"Did you ever meet any of those dead?" I asked, interrupting him before he could finish his curse.

"From the camps? Nah. You'd think it would be the opposite. Monsters just pass away leaving the tortured behind to suffer. But the tortured leave. They reach the end and the ending takes them. I think you have to earn oblivion. I don't think it's ever freely given to you."

"Did they earn it or is it a further suffering, because of it?"

"Ask yourself that question when you're dead and still

here and nothing's changed. They earned it. We deserved it. Moths under glass, wounded. That's us. Maybe when those pages of yours about us fade we can be released. Or maybe this is hell nor am I ever out of it."

"Poetic," I said.

"I've got forever. This century," he rose then, "I can be poetic. Next century if I'm still here I can be as fucking crude as I want. After that? Hope there is no after that. Anyway, I'm going to my brothel to see all the girls I'll never touch. Bye."

He did not walk away so much as fold upward, legs distending to sheets of themselves, great broad chest flattened into the map of some lost and unknown continent, leaving the head last which tore itself out of the room.

"After I finish up, we can start. Is that okay with you?"

"I got time," she said. "Finish your drink."

Chapter 2

Typhoid winter

My apartment was relatively small. I mention that detail only because normally one expects a tiny place to also be rundown, decrepit as if its size likewise determined its character.

Actually, my place was quite clean, even modern. It was located where the city had been rebuilt after it had been bombed during the last days of the war. I had a whole new building and owned the smallest part of it.

"Would you want me to sit?" she asked.

"Yes please," I say, shifting our conversation from the past to the present. Normally one isn't allowed to do that but since she might not even be here it makes sense to allow her to slide forward in time, to become an aspect of *now* rather than an aspect of *then*.

"I don't suppose you eat or drink?"

"No."

I take pages from my briefcase, idly fingering the leather, remembering it was once alive and now shifting forward to the present it no longer is, as I take my seat at the table opposite her.

I hand the last poems to her. She looks them over.

She isn't happy.

"This should have been made better."

"What was the point of it anyway?"

"You don't know?"

"I know you, so I know what you did, in the time allotted to you. But no, I can't really say what you might have done."

"Okay. Let me tell you."

She begins.

"It begins in a place called Mufisdoon. Yes, I know you gathered that.

"It's an endless desert home to tribes of humanity. Some are monsters, some are not. The whole world is ruled over by a man named Bellerus. The tyrant. He has the people extract salt from the sand, whole sand harvesters who have to draw up this commodity which he scatters among the stars.

"Eventually someone seeks to rise against his evil rule. I had a few names for her. Her names?

"Yeirsea was one. Another was Miryooku. Third was Calygairia. So, she lives in this rocky outcrop of stone with her people who don't believe women can be warriors. But she proves them wrong.

"She becomes this messianic figure meant to save everyone. Rallies her armies, and fights all those who would oppose her.

"Eventually she leads them and they storm the palace of the evil tyrant, only to learn the truth.

"See, I had the idea throughout the story people dreamed, and in dreams, the world was not a desert at all but a garden where everyone was peaceful and content. There was no war, no thirst, no hunger. It was this wintry country with forests of flower stems the colour of glass which shielded them from a cooler sun.

"And everyone in that dream life corresponded to everyone in their life except for her. She never saw her other life in the dream. Like she wasn't there.

"So, anyway, they reach the throne room, battle the guards, and in the centre, there is Bellerus. Only Bellerus is her. Bellerus is the person she was in her dreams who escaped and has been causing all this destruction because Bellerus cannot accept that such a place as Mufisdoon existed when he had paradise and now it's lost to him.

"And he explains if she kills him both die. If she hurts him, both hurt. All she can do is leave him be and return to her own pathetic life or else it ends.

"Instead, she gives him a massive dose of this salt which allows one to feel so content, like a warm bath or a cool wind, and she gives him such a massive dose he falls asleep for the first time in forever. And he dreams.

"He dreams he has returned to his former world which he couldn't do before because he hadn't finished ruining the hell he saw, but denied the chance he sleeps and dreams, and in his dreams, she is there.

"Story ends."

I had been taking notes the entire time. When finished I glanced up and asked if she had anything else to add, just in case.

"No."

"That's a novel," I say, "not a poem. You never wrote novels before."

"My first, last, and only attempt. Is that information enough for you to finish it?"

"A few details first. Where did humanity come from? You said this was an alien planet so did people arrive here on purpose, by accident?"

"Accident. A spaceship went off course."

"A few things I don't get. You mentioned he scattered this across the stars. To whom exactly did he scatter it?"

"To other worlds, to other peoples of humanity."

"So why couldn't the people of Mufisdoon simply leave?"

"He controlled the ships."

"Where did he get ships?"

"From the other worlds."

Leaving the logic of that statement aside I press on.

"Why didn't other people come to Mufisdoon if the salt was so precious?"

"He held a monopoly on it."

"And no one else could try to take it?"

"The salt made life better for many so no one wanted to take it from him. They just wanted to leave everything as it was."

"How did he escape the dream?"

"I don't know. I never got that far into the tale."

"What is the point of it? What were you trying to say?"

"That we're all our own worst enemies. Until we stop being them."

"You'll have to come back you know. I can't just be given this and make something to the extent you want. We'll have to compromise. My employer only wants me to improve the poem, not make something whole cloth."

"Even if it was my original idea?"

"How do I prove that without you walking into my office? Even if you exist that just raises more problems. Can you imagine the paperwork involved if potentially any dead person could ask for someone to change the records on themselves, to say they would have done this instead of that? Extrapolating a poem is one thing but if I create a novel and give this to them and they ask me to prove my source, and my source is you, and you prove yourself to them, well then it will never end for the living, will it?"

"There will always be the fear of some person editing their own lives because it's what they wanted to be or do."

"Maybe that's the point," she said. She says. "Maybe the final goal will be that. To guess every detail of a life, how things could have been?"

"I want to reject that idea if I can. Our purpose is to know what was. What might have been in all cases, in all lives? It's like calculating Pi. That would never end. That's a monument to human absurdity.

"And you know it would diminish a life if we could simply say 'if only they had done something different than they did.' It would be taking all those who died in the camps and stating if only he had boarded a different train a day before he

was arrested or if only that family had immigrated a year previous or if only our leader hadn't been such a complete monster, it would all be perfect now and all of us living in heaven.

"You know how unfair that is, making us guess with perfect clarity events we have no knowledge of, until too late."

"I know," she says simply. "I should have boarded a train a day earlier than I did. But I didn't and I'm here. You think."

I ponder the growing gulf inside of me, the knowledge of having to count entire multitudes of lives diverging endlessly. I feel the branches stretch ahead forever and I am alone. I feel the void beckon me for a moment and I try to silence it. But can't.

"Look, I got enough time tonight to figure out a few things. Make a draft, a synopsis. I don't suppose you sleep but I do. So, unless you want to creepily stare at me all night please leave my apartment, go hunting around in graves, or see Sam or someone else you knew, and return in the morning."

"What time?"

"Second seventh of the day. Will that work?"

"Okay."

And she folds herself out of my room, and I begin.

I start by trying to figure out the poem itself. Despite her intentions, I always begin with what one has, not what they wanted there to be.

The synopsis will come as much out of the poem as out of her possibly nonexistent words.

Mufisdoon, A Uluma

*There is an islands in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand,
and in the garden beside salt seas
dreamers recline who will not*

*sleep nor understand,
gazing only always into the waters
beneath bone trees.*

*Women have insect ink etched along their faces
there, where a kite the colour of wine races
empty skies, gazing at the roads like leaves
scattering into themselves, where all walk together, spaces
left only for the grieving . . . she grieves.*

Okay. Second to last line is too long. Fourth line is too long as well and the sixth. Also, it should read "island," not "islands."

*There is an island in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand,
and in the garden beside salt seas
dwell those who do not understand,
They gaze into the waters beneath bone trees.*

No.

*There is an island in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand
and in the garden beside salt seas
dwell those who do not understand,
gazing into waters beneath bone trees.*

Better.

*Women with insect ink etched on their faces
there where a kite the colour of wine races
empty skies, gazing at the roads like leaves
scattering, where all walk together, spaces*

left only for the grieving . . . she grieves.

Is this our hero? Is she Miryooku?

Next section.

*II. The country spins on forever, world of bridges and of spires,
towers to God or silences, though God is silence here.
They are the people of the towers, harvesters of salt
which allows relief, to forget sand and heat, perhaps
forget themselves, retire their own sins or skins as silences, (let) lapse
names, lapse faces, lapse masks. At last the fault
is gone, the world is gone except the shadow of a misspent year,
save the seasons of the feasts, and the fires.*

Much too long. Needlessly so. I take my red pen and cut
out the bits which don't make sense anymore.

*It is the country of bridges and of the spires,
towers to God, or silences. God is silent here.
They are of the towers, harvesters of salt
allowing them to forget sand and heat, perhaps
forget themselves, their skins, let lapse
names, faces, masks. At last, the final fault
is gone except the shadow of a misspent year,
save the seasons of the feasts and of the fires.*

I move on. My red pen dripping blood.

*III. Rebels brood in typhoid winters of heat.
She broods. Where the bone-eaters eat,
where the plague drinkers drink
she thinks of the tyrant, complete,
while they in his glances . . . thirsts.*

*Typhoid winter comes where deserts cool,
where salt to ocean is or shadows pool
 into wine they drink, to forget,
 all save thirst, this jewel
of life begging to die, not yet.*

The line length is off with this one. But sometimes a mistake works better than it should. I can always change it later if I want.

*IV. It is not always so. Deserts in winter
grew, in dreams in dreams the word
salt does not exist, nor hunger nor thirst.
The rebel is no rebel there, where heaven births
herself. What is there to rebel against, mirths'
laughter of no taint of fear? They are cursed
only here, in empty countries of heard
only by mad prophets swimming the air, wine bitter.*

I eliminate the fourth part with a stroke of my pen. I turn to the second attempt.

Mufisdoon, A Tsuarya

*There is an island in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand.
In gardens by waters of salt, they stand
neath bone salt trees winter cast,
gazing to waters beneath bone trees, and
where eyes have led follow carelessly.*

*Women, insect ink about their eyes, last
daughters of a god dimly remembered if at all, last*

I stop myself. This line is terrible, much too long. How do I fix it?

*Women, insect ink about their eyes, last
creatures of a god no longer remembered, last*

No. Creatures doesn't work, though might be accurate.

*Women, insect ink about their eyes, last
daughters of a god unremembered, last*

There we go.

*There is an island in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand.
In gardens by waters of salt, they stand
neath bone salt trees winter cast,
gazing to waters beneath bone trees, and
where eyes have led follow carelessly.*

*Women, insect ink about their eyes, last
daughters of a god unremembered, last
sons beside them gazing to infinity. Past
is its own land now, day to come a lonely
unglimpsed shore. What's it for, sand
seas, an island, temples to gods passed
namelessly away? Beneath bone trees
they watch still, reclining to dreams, only
children left, remnant of . . . humanity.*

I stare over the completed poem and then place all the sections together.

Mufisdoon, A Poem

*I. There is an island in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand
and in the garden beside salt seas
dwell those who do not understand,
gazing into waters beneath bone trees.*

*Women with insect ink etched on their faces
there where a kite the colour of wine races
empty skies, gazing at the roads like leaves
scattering, where all walk together, spaces
left only for the grieving . . . she grieves.*

*II. It is the country of bridges and of the spires,
towers to God, or silences. God is silent here.
They are of the towers, harvesters of salt
allowing them to forget sand and heat, perhaps
forget themselves, their own skins, let lapse
names, faces, masks. At last, the final fault
is gone except the shadow of a misspent year,
save the seasons of the feasts and of the fires.*

*III. Rebels brood in typhoid winters of heat.
She broods. Where the bone-eaters eat,
where the plague drinkers drink
she thinks of the tyrant, complete,
while they in his glances . . . thirsts.*

*Typhoid winter comes where deserts cool,
where salt to ocean is or shadows pool
into wine they drink, to forget,*

*all save thirst, this jewel
of life begging to die, not yet.*

*IV. There is an island in a sea of sand,
there is a garden in a carved bone hand.
In gardens by waters of salt, they stand
neath bone salt trees winter cast,
gazing to waters beneath bone trees, and
where eyes have led follow carelessly.*

*Women, insect ink about their eyes, last
daughters of a god unremembered, last
sons beside them gazing to infinity. Past
is its own land now, day to come a lonely
unglimpsed shore. What's it for, sand*

*seas, an island, temples to gods passed
namelessly away? Beneath bone trees
they watch still, reclining to dreams, only
children left, remnant of . . . humanity.*

Satisfied I carefully go to my typewriter on the desk behind me and type it up. As I do so, since you have never really been in my apartment until now and since I haven't described it beyond it being small let me do so while I finish this poem for a dead woman.

My apartment has a living area with a kitchen table, three chairs, all from before the war, and two windows which let me look out into the courtyard. I have a single lamp overhead which lets me work and is only four feet off the ground. My bedroom is located to my left right now, the desk in the corner, the window to my right, and the hum of a refrigerator buzzing into and out of existence. That is behind me now.

My bedroom has only a small bed which I will be using in roughly two hours. If you were a native of our country you would call it one-seventh a day from now.

Having typed it up I try to work out what to do with it next.

I promised a synopsis but that comprises the notes I'd already taken. The notebook is lying on the kitchen table, I reach back and look over the ideas the dead woman gave me.

There isn't enough here to justify it. A novel I mean. It's a clever idea but the poem with some simple editing is fine as a closing performance. This can be added to her last book of poetry and not hurt her reputation at all.

Assuming anyone actually makes a book of her poems. With the way things are this might only be known by a few editors like myself or the victors across the waters and I don't think they'll bring the public's interest to her work.

She lost after all. Everybody who counted lost.

Then again, had there never been a war would this even be here? Or had there never been the siege of Traija and she was alive now would that automatically mean she would get her poetry published here?

Impossible to say. For all I know had she lived a good long life no one would have even known her name or that she had written anything at all.

Dismissing the absurdity of trying to figure out these games I type up a simple synopsis of her idea, gaze outside to see two cockroaches in the lamplight having sex, then go to bed.

And yes, I mean actual cockroaches. That wasn't some obtuse racist insult to anyone.

Goodnight.

In the morning, I showered, dressed, and thought about the book two women asked me to write. Crave already had her

priority done. I could hand this in today and demonstrate the conclusion of my labour.

Isih wanted more though. She expected me to make a novel or at least a longer story out of this poem and her recitation last night.

I had a simple breakfast of milk and honey and bread . . . it was ersatz milk, honey, and bread and I won't disgust you with what the food actually was.

She came at the second seventh on schedule, I showed her the poem, and she liked it, I showed her the synopsis, and she did not like it.

She wanted more.

"Like I said last night, can't give you everything you want. We have to compromise. There just isn't enough material here to make a novel."

"What if I use parts of yours then?" she asks.

"Mine?"

"While you slept, I looked over your manuscripts. You have quite a few failed novels of your own. I could splice parts of my ideas into some of yours. I could scaffold pieces of Mufisdoon into that city of the dead you're working on now."

"And why would I let you hijack my own story?"

"You haven't finished it," she says. "And you don't know how it's supposed to even work. My story isn't finished either but maybe we can put them both together and that will make a complete narrative then."

"Still isn't enough."

"How about Sam's story? You can add his story too."

"Which story?"

"The one he never finished. You have it in your records. Use that one."

"Well while we're at it how about the passages from all those writers last night or Crave's biography or the Kuri or maybe

giant insects? Like all that?"

"I do," she says, "I like it a lot. That word, Yvragraine. Can you use that too?"

"You're serious?"

"My story isn't finished. Neither is yours. Together we can finish it."

"But it won't be your story anymore. It won't be your potential chance. It will be ours, it will be theirs."

"It will be *done*," she says, finally, quietly, as if that's all that matters to her.

"Why this change of heart?"

"Hijraelis," she says. "Your story is my story anyway. You just never really noticed it."

"Can't give a report of how I put my story and yours together."

"Can publish it though. With my permission."

"And Yvragraine? That's not my work at all."

"Who was that writer talking last night? Ask him. Ask him if you can try to tackle his universe too."

"I could say no. I'm already doing you a favour, I finished your poem."

"But not my story. And it's your unfinished story too. You're the narrator after all. If you say no won't the reader wonder what might have been?"

She got me there.

"Okay. But when we're talking to the writer of Yvragraine you let me do the talking."

"Are you serious?" she asks.

"Only sometimes," I say, "on days ending with Y."

Chapter 3

Wars of the stray dogs

"You want to use my story?"

"If it's not too much trouble."

"My story isn't done yet. I've only written the first few pages."

"Well, speaking on behalf of someone who likes your work I was curious if I could attempt an extrapolation of what you were trying to say."

"Extrapolation, huh?"

"If it's not too much of a problem, yeah."

"What's your friend's name?"

"Hijraelis."

"Odd name."

"Odd person."

"Well, I don't see the harm. You know as we can switch."

"Switch?"

"I've seen you writing in that corner of the pub, scribbling away. Bet you've got a narrative of your own. Something troubling you, keeping you awake. Let's trade. Give me your idea, I'll give you mine."

"I didn't bring my papers with me."

"Ah, I got a good memory. Tell it to me. And I'll give these papers to you."

So, I begin.

"There is a planet called Hlyagathica. And on it are giant insects, ants, moths, wasps, velvet worms, and spiders. I know spiders and velvet worms aren't insects. I just like the name insect is all.

"Anyway, Hijraelis is a waxwing. Waxwings are moths that have human speech, almost human intelligence. Their

purpose is to bring other beings together and make them compatible. Imagine a spider making love to an ant and out of this union emerges something new. That's what waxwings do. They tailor flesh, make it compatible, and allow love to flourish where it couldn't exist before.

"Anyway, Hijraelis is one of them and she goes off exploring the city of the dead, this remnant of an older civilization none know of. She discovers in the city eventually a record, statues, and information about a species that had existed here before.

"Humanity.

"Humanity had come here first. But they had changed. The children grew wings, their mouths twisted vertically and by the end, nothing human was left. The insects had grown out of human shapes and minds and forms.

"Well, this revelation unnerves her, destroys her. It's why they don't go into the city anymore. The house at the centre is a replica of a human house and inside are human replicas and a history showing their lineage into her.

"What do you think?"

He pauses a moment. He speaks.

"I can see your problem. It's not really complete, is it?"

"No. And it's not the only world in this story."

"There are others?"

"An ocean moon called Xyenaixa is where giant sea slugs dwell, a further world called Ixelira is composed of great threads, spider webs which are the stems of an endless flowering plant, and a desert moon called Chaarn where the sand hungrily licks at flesh and creatures there drain the living of their very breath.

"And Kor Korak where the bones of the dragons are."

"Very poetic. But none of this exactly adds to the plot, does it? I mean it's very beautifully told but isn't much when you strip it away."

"I know."

"Okay. Let's trade. Mind you, we can still take our original ideas of course. I can still use Yvragraine, you still use . . . how you pronounce that?"

"Ha-lya-gath-i-ca."

"Halya. Okay. Well, I want to keep the chance to make my Yvragraine. But you can make your own. And I can make my own Halya. Deal?"

I glance at Jael beside me as she nods her assent.

"Deal," I say. And we shake hands, I take a copy of his notes and he takes the memory of my story.

And that is that.

"You ever wonder why we're doing this?"

I glance up from my desk to see Crave standing over me.

"Sometimes."

"How goes the project I asked for?"

"It's finished."

I hand her the poem, she reads it and then I mention the idea of a novel forming from out the surface tension of the poem.

"Surface tension?"

"Skin of the poem doesn't sound right. And there is a lot of tension right now."

She glances over the notes I have, both mine and those of the other writer and I mention Sam's story will be needed too.

She nods her assent.

"You ever wonder why you're doing this?"

I glance up from my desk to see Crave standing over me.

"Sometimes."

"How goes the project I asked for?"

"It's finished."

I hand the poem to her, she reads it, and then I mention the

idea of a novel forming from the poem.

"What novel?"

I show her my notes and those of the writer and mention I will need Sam's story too.

She says no.

"You ever wonder why they did all this?"

"They?"

"The ones who started the war? Your people?"

"I can't answer for my people. Can only answer for myself."

"So, what did you do during the war?"

I glance from my desk to see Crave standing over me, staring down.

"I was a clerk. Did work like this."

"Not exactly like this though. You notarized the lives of people who were going to die, not those already dead."

"What did you do during the war Miss Crave?"

"I was a sniper."

"So, you got a chance to see the faces of the people you killed, yes?"

"True."

"All I ever saw was paper and ink, and I never killed anyone."

"You could have quit."

"So could you," I say. "Except you had a gun. And we always knew we had a gun, to our heads."

"Is the work done I asked for?"

"Finished it last night."

I hand her the poem. I mention the novel. I mention needing Sam's story. She asks why this time. I tell her a dead woman wants me to do it.

She looks up to a far corner of the room and a look crosses

her face, the same look I have when I stare at Jael for too long.
“When it’s done give me a copy,” she says and walks away.

“So why do we do it?”

At night sometimes writers get together and tell stories.
Not always at pubs. Not tonight.

Tonight, we’re in the apartment of Mr. . . . well he doesn’t want me to give you his name so I won’t. For clarity’s sake let’s call these people gathered A, B, C, D, and me.

And Jael makes six.

This is the apartment of Mr. A (which I will not describe in any detail at all,) and he’s asking this question I was kind of asked and kind of thought in different versions of the tale I am now telling.

“By *it*, do you mean?” B asks.

Now I cannot tell you their faces or their gender though Mr. A has no problem revealing himself as a man. That mean B can be a woman or a man, as can C and D. I will leave it to you to decide their gender, appearance, their age, etc.

“Why is it that after the war stories became so immense, so commonplace? This is what I mean.”

“I would think the emergence of stories is simply a way to pass the time and give us purpose. It has no weight, after all, costs us nothing to speak and it allows us the chance to build even if only in the air.” All this D says as we listen.

“But why are so many of our stories set in other worlds, in countries that never were? Today I did a catalogue of fictitious places, made up geographies and I found such ideas had exploded across our city. You can see bakers and shopkeepers and bankers talk about planets orbiting black stars and little children playing games of becoming black roses, saying in their play the entire world is just a garden full of things like them.

"There are whispers of sun gods and star gods and raven knights and owl knights and countries of two-headed animals. There are stories of creatures who speak in fire . . ." at this my ears prick up, "and whose litanies burn the atmosphere away."

"What are they called, these titans of fire?" I ask.

"They are called strginalos," he says.

"And who has named them?"

"I do not know. The name scatters across the city, as do their stories."

"Why does this matter?" C asks. "Does it concern us where ideas come, how they are conceived? It is enough they are."

"Is it?" A asks. "For I ask you, before the war were stories so richly written? Yet now they are outpouring and never ceasing. Today I wrote an epic without even knowing it. I was not even aware of the words . . .," he trails a moment, then returns, "and so I ask you all why is this fate befalling us?"

"Because they are the dead," I say, "perhaps they are the dead as story?"

"An idea."

"Perhaps at the war's end the dead made communion with one another," and here I glance to Jael, "and a few decided they wanted to continue influencing the world. Writers who never had the chance to finish what they wanted to say. So now they are forcing the living to do it, to become muses and instruments of the dead."

"A marvellous idea," B says, "but I have an equally valid one."

"Do tell," I say.

"I think it is just our way of keeping ourselves sane."

"Explain."

"During the war, we saw cities burn and bodies burn and lives scattered. Our world, what is it in the grand scheme of things? It is nothing, a maggot crawling a corpse we have named night.

And now we know that to be human is to be plagued by this cancerous knowledge. We have failed. We have witnessed . . . atrocity.

“Our cities may rebuild, our city has already thanks to our enemies. Our leaders have seen the guillotine and the firing line, first used against the innocent, now used against them. What is there in being human worthy of respect? What is there in being ourselves, being denizens of this world by which we should measure gratitude or pride or hope? Every kindness was beaten out of the last decade of this century and what is left? Ashes.

“But if we can imagine another, better world, if behind our eyes can linger some Eden that never fell to rest our lives upon, this then becomes our new gospel. Our new religion. Our new salvation.

“And this is why I believe bakers and shopkeepers and bankers are dreaming of things unreal because reality has raped us enough. Only this remains. I believe I have explained it all to your satisfaction.”

There was more discussion after this of course and I am paraphrasing what was said, giving you the meaning of the words, not their entire content. It is easy to edit this into something poetic but B was never a truly eloquent speaker and so stammered, cursed a few times, and excitedly raised and lowered hands, voice, etc.

Smoothing all that into this is simply easier for you.

Afterward, we ate, drank, told stories, Jael folded herself out of the room, I let myself out the door and the others continued talking into the night, deciding whether the dead motivated us or the living.

Was hell to be dead? Or was hell to be here?

I don't think they ever found an answer to that, or if they did I left, so never got the answer.

I spent the next day going over Yvragraine. The writer's idea was interesting, a world without conflict coupled with those exiled who needed conflict to survive. Of course, I said all this before but you might not have been paying attention in a previous passage so I'm saying it twice.

This however did not fit with Mufisdoon nor did it in any way fit with Hlyagathica nor with Sam's story either.

Pieces thrown together haphazardly without purpose.

"Are you giving up on me?"

"No, but as I said I have to compromise. A novel just seems impossible out of all this."

"Maybe the other one will figure it out."

"Maybe."

I haven't given his name yet, that other writer, and there is a good reason for this. When he gets my idea at a future time, he will use it and my name in a very . . . bad way. He will use my name as something violently sadistic and cruel. I could protest at that future time but I don't. I let him turn my name into something horrific. Now if you know his name that means you can find his book and if you find his book you can look it up and if you look it up then you can see what I mean.

Since I don't want you to, you'll just have to suffer not knowing, at least until he tells his story in my story which I can't prevent. But at least you won't find his book, so there's that.

"What's the problem?"

Sam unfolds himself into my room.

"How was the brothel?"

"Unsatisfying. Problem?"

I hand him the notes. Either the dead can touch or in my delusion, I am imagining the dead can touch so as he reads the papers are actually falling scattered like autumn leaves to the floor.

Jael is across from me glancing out the window, perhaps

staring at those same cockroaches making love or something else only the dead see.

He hands the papers back to me.

"Miss Isih," he says.

"Yes?"

"Why are you making our Carnoton do impossible things?"

"I don't see a story as being especially impossible."

"Don't you mean novel?"

"We're compromising. Story will suffice."

"Still, it isn't very fair having him piece all this together."

"Neither is being dead."

"Neither are taxes, bad weather, robbery, genital mutilation, or stale beer, but one endures as one can. Again, why?"

"I just want my story done."

"These are not your stories. One of them is mine and two more are our Carnoton's and his compatriot's."

"It's alright," I say, "I can work on this."

"How exactly?"

I'm not certain if Jael asked that or Sam.

"I can find a way."

"Wasn't the deal Miss Isih for him to create your tale, period?"

"I'm changing the rules. I can do that."

"Can she do that?" Sam asks me.

"I'm narrating but she is a main character and so far, her objective to put all this together is more exciting than just having me stretch out a piece of hers which doesn't have enough material to cover itself."

"True, very true." Sam takes a seat out of the air, one I can't see, and sits between Jael and me. "But won't the reader be bored watching you piece together a story *inside* a story? I mean I

would find that boring. Certainly, whoever is reading this might be bored too."

"What do you recommend?"

"Go from narrator to character my friend. In a story, one can do anything. So why don't you and her go on walkabout inside each of the stories and see things from the inside?"

"It will be more entertaining and if you fail the reader can certainly pull these threads together themselves. They can fix the book, even if you can't."

"How would that work?"

"Every seen a stray dog walking behind a stranger. At some point either the dog gets angry and they fight or they become friends and they enter a synchronous relationship. Dog, meet stranger." At this, he picked up Jael's hand and put it upon my own.

"How long will this take?"

"I'd say three chapters, maybe four. No more than five."

"How many hours, days?"

"Well, if you say in your narration that the following day you go to work it has to happen because you narrated it. So just say it before we begin."

"Okay," I start to speak, "the following day I go to . . ."

At that point I pass out, leaving the future entirely uncertain.

Chapter 4

Self/same

I was on Mufisdoon.

At a glance, I saw the entire narrative, the woman in the desert, isles of stone rising out of sand seas, the black salt they harvested, thousands of hands sifting the grains away, and vast spaceships carrying their passengers into the night.

Saw the battles, the tyrant, the dream, and I was in all of it.

"Where are we?" Jael asks. Now she is the woman, now she is Miryooku and I am Bellerus.

"I don't like Miryooku as a name."

"How about Yeirsea?"

"Calygairia . . . Calya. That's a good name."

We are in the throne room at the epic's end. I am seated upon a throne, she has entered dressed in robes to keep the dust from her mouth and nose, and with her an army of nameless inconsequential people who only exist to make her work reach its end and are never given enough back story to make them seem real.

"It's over," she says to me and I hear myself say, "Do you not understand, we are one. You and I are the same. I am your shadow, and you are mine. Should I perish, you shall perish too. Should I suffer, you suffer. Why then," she asks, "Have you done all this to us? Why have you starved us, beaten us if you are me?" She pauses. "Because I hate you. I hate everything about you. I hate this world, this life. I remember Eden but I have memories of hell. Can you imagine the suffering to be cast out of my own world? Can you not understand that the only remedy is for you to return to your sand and your pitiful life and let me be so that I may end your world and remake it in a better image?" She steps closer now. The salt is in her hand, encased in a dagger. She plunges it against my throat, I feel the hit sting as it harmlessly

injects the sunless waters of memory and I allow myself to fall backward, and dream.

Before I could see sand seas and heat never ended, permeating everything, even the stones of my throne room, radiating warmth.

Here it is cool. I am beneath the shade of great glass-bodied stems rising upward, flowers showering petals themselves glass-coloured and I feel this wave of a cool peace come over me.

And Jael/Calya is there and she holds out her hand to me and I hold out my hand to her. Story ends. But we are still here.

"I thought that would be enough," she says. We stare about quizzically, wondering at the shape of her mind to have invented all this during the siege of Traija.

"How many pages could you have made out of this?"

"It's only a page and a half now. If I spread out everything, your, her, early life, first sexual encounter, first realization of how terrible the world is, first battle, maybe sixty pages. Seventy tops. But I doubt it."

"Why?"

"It's all been said before."

We go walking beneath the glass stems, noticing others there awakening into paradise.

"It hasn't been said this way."

"But it has Jael."

"Calya."

"Jael."

A few of the people awakening begin to moan, either from pleasure or from pain. I could describe their features but I'll just focus on one. She is this slip of a girl with ice-blue eyes and hair that shimmers in the cool sunlight. She is wearing a diaphanous garment like a tunic and as she wakes, she asks her name. I don't know it.

Jael and I go walking on from her.

"Calya. Not Jael."

"Jael," I repeat, "and what is unique here? Hmm? The tyrant, the world, yourself? Your poem was interesting but it hardly leads to all this and this hardly leads to anything truly massive. It's all been said."

"Well find something interesting in it then before we move on. Or we aren't leaving and you won't be going to work."

"Oh, the torture," I intone sarcastically.

"And if you're fired what happens to your nice little life? Do you think they will let you sit idly by when your punishment remains?"

"If it is my punishment, it will not be taken from me just because I'm not there Jael."

"Cal . . . Jael, fine."

After a moment we return to Mufisdoon and I do a survey of hell. The desert world is hot, infinitely so. Even in the throne room, I sweated but beyond the oceans of heat would rise even unto the spire cities in the sky.

The sand seas sifted and as we walked, I imagined myself drowning, infinite drowning pools of sand where one false footfall would lead to plunging into those boiling grains . . .

"Footfalls? You could have just said step."

"True enough."

One false step would lead to plunging into those boiling grains of sand. But beyond the black salt and the cities I see nothing of interest here.

"What about the other places of humanity?"

"Never thought much about them. It all just centered here."

"So, if we were to step off the world we wouldn't arrive at another place, but just void?"

"Yes."

“Okay, so maybe Hlyagathica is part of the same universe then. That could be interesting. A tale separated by distance not by theme. Could work.”

As we walk further, I notice a black rose blooming in the middle of the sand sea. As we approach our perspective shifts and suddenly it is a great obsidian tree rising forever into the sky. Each leaf of it is broad and blade-sharp, its bark harder than a diamond my hand has not felt. If I wished this tree could be the road from Mufisdoon to Hlyagathica . . .

“Do you wish it? Would this not make it worthy of note? A road between night in the shape of a rose-become-tree?”

“B had the same idea a week ago,” I lie.

“I know you’re lying. You just wrote that in the sentence previous.”

Damn.

“Alright, that is interesting. I’ll grant you that.”

“Shall we go then? Go to your world next?”

In a flash we depart, selfsame.

Chapter 5
Many summers all
cannot enjoy

Since I had many worlds as opposed to Jael's one, we did not arrive at Hlyagathica. Instead, we stood upon the edge of the solar system gazing at the various planets spinning about like mad tops in their orbits.

Then in a flash, we stepped upon Kor Korak.

I had envisioned it as a wasteland, which it was. And I had envisioned the bones of dragons scattered here. And there were. I cannot describe them all so I will just describe one.

An elongated snout poked halfway from the earth and one could see the ridges of a spinal column like regular hills at set intervals. The great wings, so often featured in these stories, did not exist here. It seemed to me incredulous for a dragon to have wings since no creature as large as this could fly.

The talons of a hand jutted likewise from the dune, each talon of which put me and Jael in shadow. The mouth could fit an orchestra and the ridges of the spinal column seemed like the turrets and cannons of tanks I had seen, once, encircling the capital the last day of the . . .

Then Chaarn.

Sand like Mufisdoon's, but it ate at our boots.

"Why is the sand eating at our boots?"

"I thought it was a beautiful image, the very ground devouring us."

In the distance, the oxygen-varmpires were seen.

"Varmpires?"

I check the sentence again.

"Vampires."

"Got it."

They appear like wraiths, spools of funeral clothing like

burial shrouds, and they approach. They are creatures of pure nightmare capable of taking one's breath away. They are glorious terrors. They remind me of the last time I saw Grandmother placed in the shroud carried to her final resting place, that copse of trees where no light was seen and grave markers mingled in the undergrowth and I half-imagined hearing her breathing whispering my name even as they lowered her in the ground whispering always whispering my . . .

"Carnoton?"

I glance up from my reverie. One of them is talking to me.

"Yes."

"Is that you?"

It is speaking in Grandmother's voice.

"Yes."

"I missed you," she says, and I say I missed her too. Of course, she will play her role, consume my breath, I wait for this.

It doesn't happen.

"Would you care for some tea?"

"Yes."

Before tea, a table for the teapot and two chairs manifest though we are gone. I whisper her name as we go, mournfully.

Then Ixelira, thread forests which glisten so like the stem forests of Mufisdoon's dream country.

"What are they?" Jael asks.

"They were human once. But in coming here they gave birth to trees which took root then the flowering plants gave birth to things without flowers and they in turn gave birth to things without colour. And they in turn gave birth to this."

We listen as the threads with almost human tongue talk amongst one another, recalling old conversations their ancestors had.

I am reminded suddenly of a book about a pool in a hidden underground world where none die. They feed on beetles

there, on creatures who sap away things like love and hate, and place those things into the bodies of smaller creatures, ant colonies reliving the lusts of young lovers, or a blind spider painting a masterpiece against a stone wall.

In the drowning pool of their Eden these immortals are hollowed out until at the end nothing is left save living, finally allowing themselves to die and escape the under-skin of the water, to rise and become men and women only in the dreams of the immortal kind . . .

I do not know who wrote the book.

"Perhaps you did," she says.

"No. I was a boy when I read it, in some collection. What was it called? *In The Country of the Under-Glass*."

"Under glass was hyphenated?"

"Yeah. I don't remember who wrote it though."

Listening to the thread forests speaking I try to think upon their words, listening to their lusts, their jealousies like things in amber now preserved. Without realizing it I echo one of them.

"We are only things of our own time and place. To these forests what are we but ghosts? To us what are they but ghosts?"

A few of the threads are weeping now, rejected lovers spending their final moments staring at the knives in their hands. I realize the thread who spoke through me imagined itself a man seeing his children descend, root themselves, and seal themselves away.

All these creatures are living in past tense.

I depart, the wounds of the past centuries still left jagged in my memory.

Finally, we cross to Hlyagathia.

"You meant Hlyagathica."

Damn, she's right.

The shallow sea lay beneath the northern and southern

world. To the north the waxwings were and to the south the ants, spiders, and velvet worms.

I had envisioned wasps somewhere as well but I wasn't certain anymore what country they occupied.

"Okay, we're here. Now what?"

Hijraelis swam the sky over us and in the distance of the empty country I could see the city of the dead. She was going there.

I decided I wanted to save time so instead of narrating I took the pages out at the first of the book and placed them here as well.

"Isn't that cheating?"

"Only if you get caught," I said.

In the distance, one could see something burning. The strginalos had woken by this time. They could only speak in fire and spent their days wandering the inner deserts, talking to themselves, making litanies which turned dunes to glass.

Two pillars of fire were blazing though. A conversation was forming, scrawling heat along the air, messages of love or war. Of course, since fire was their only language it hardly mattered what they said. Tragedy would always result for any who were not them.

Had the city eyes then it would have seen.

Had the street sensation it could have felt the heat pouring from the lowlands upward into it, piercing past the walls.

Instead, it seemed the city of the dead was lifeless.

It seemed . . .

The streets tautly stretched themselves across the stone beneath, reclining. Buildings squat like venomous toads marched forward and back, inches at a time in the acidic winds.

In all directions, falling from the flattened hill where its body lay the lowlands spread, crawling away from it as if crouching in some

subconscious fear. If one could imagine earth or sand as a living thing, a beast stalking a jungle, if one could imagine pigeons haunted by the lamplight of grey midnight cities sputtering into the dark at the sound of a gun or a scream well then one might imagine the countryside winnowing away now, gazing at the city of the dead in dread, sightlessly.

Then came the sound of wings . . .

Transparent ice-veined wings approached and attached to them a body and attached to the body a name. Hijraelis. It is important to recognize such details, wings separate and yet connected, sloping to the realization of flesh, sloping further to the realization of speech.

A white translucent body then, legs and arms thin as the branches of nonexistent bone trees, two large sapphire eyes bulging from a flattened face and a thin slit mouth vertically opening and closing in her effort to fly.

She came, entering the maw-gate of the city, and waited.

History began here, so some claimed.

This expanse of stone, walls rising like titans into the clouds, walls grey as parchment or dark as armour and only the maw-gate an opening, a wound.

She came for no others came.

The city of the dead was not permitted entrance yet likewise was it never felled. Since none were allowed here so too it was never allowed to be destroyed. As such, though it was meant as forbidden it was sought out, though only she remained to seek it.

There were others of course, whole countries beyond the shallow sea and her people remained to the east, to their temples dedicated to those of Yvragraine and Sbtharthyl, but there no longer lingered a hunger for this mausoleum place. At some point during the last season, most of those who had secretly journeyed west lost something upon their return and would not leave again.

Only she remained to perform the profane rites.

She entered.

The maw-gate loomed like a half-formed mouth, beyond it streets bled in six directions like the veins or arteries of an arm.

The buildings were stout, thick walls which jutted at odd angles making misshapen piles of cubes reaching skyward, each shorter than the last till at the very top there seemed nothing at all.

Each cube rotated adjacent to the former, shifting out of sync with whatever came below it.

Hijraelis marvelled at the madness of such construction and then went further into the city.

Her feet carried her ever forward, thin splinters of toes the colour of snow and she heard from the empty streets the howl.

This howl had been written of. It rose like a scream then flattened out, broadening into something unnatural. It was the sound the dead made when new births shone forth, the sound the grey galgeirim made, those armoured beetles who died first and then gave birth, their skin cracking into sounds the same as this.

Being familiar with such a sound she wandered on. Neither the dead nor the living gave her pause or cause for fear.

After 108 steps she stopped. There was the temple spoken of by former exiles to this place. A great ziggurat rose, a mountain slowly ascending into a hill.

The pyramidal base loomed so far before her she would not perceive it while the steps lifted upward, the base shorn at regular intervals cut steeper and steeper into themselves till it too reached a point high above where it was nothing at all.

Some in coming here took the steps and found the door halfway between the sky and the world. Into this crypt, something happened, what? no one could say. The words were written but not understood.

Hijraelis decided she could merely return this way and take the steps then. Onward she went to the city's heart.

The howl stopped by now.

Where it came from, she did not know, and where it passed into she could not tell.

The buildings led into great plazas and gardens where flowers were black as ochre or obsidian weeping.

Bending to gaze at a single rose she heard it weeping still.

Quietly she prayed to those of Yoragraine and continued on her way, her feet clicking acid-wise against the ground.

The heart remained to be seen where all had seen it still.

The weeping continued in her perception but then slowly faded away. She had a half-thought to turn the flowers to ashes, to burn them all away, but couldn't. Something held her hand and her speech was not of flame.

The heart was simply a house. This too had been written of. The house was not like the city at all having windows and being all of a single shape with a sloped roof descending from the apex in two directions and a door made not of stone.

In the writings, it was clear something was supposed to happen here.

As she approached, she heard a final thing. It was a roar, something harsh and reptilian, and knowing it was reminded of those bones upon far Kor Korak, bones which dwarfed her kind and seemed unnatural in their way.

She entered, pushing the door not made of stone, crossing the threshold as she felt winter assail her soul . . .

"So then what happens?"

"I don't know."

During this reiteration, Hijraelis had descended to the dunes in front of us rather than follow what I had written. Now patiently she was waiting for me to stop talking.

Me having stopped talking she spoke.

"Why are you here?"

"We have this woman's unfinished creation and I thought

if we used yours that would work."

"No. I mean why are *you here?*"

"To get a better perspective."

"No." Her sapphire eyes gazed at me as her mouth clicked a tattoo into the air. "Why are you alive? What is the point of you? Why do you exist?"

Taken aback I paused, Jael pausing too.

"Why is my character asking me why I exist?"

"The fuck I know," Jael says.

"Don't swear in my narrative."

"Okay. Try again."

"Why is my character asking me why I exist?"

"Damned if I know."

"Better."

"Really because the first line adds so much more impact, I thought . . ."

"Back to my question," Hijaelis intones, "I would like to know why you are alive."

"Because I survived the war."

"How?"

"I hid. During the siege, I hid in a sewer. Listened to everyone above me being shot. Waited three days drinking rainwater. Then the victors found me. After I was tried, they set me to work, collating the dead."

"You don't sound traumatized."

"How would you know?" I ask.

"You implied this immense disparity but you didn't show it. You implied suffering without revealing it.' That's from an essay you wrote before the war on a book dealing with the famine in Chaqra Arel. You argued that the writer had not sufficiently examined death and destruction, the loss of millions of lives, and that this was glossed over somehow. I don't see you

examining that loss in your words or deeds. *Why are you here?"*

"To make a story," I say weakly, "and let her rest."

"When you tell the truth to yourself the story might end or might go on. I don't know. But the you standing here will no longer exist. That mask will fall. When you know why you're here you won't be here anymore."

So saying, the waxwing drew up her wings and was gone, not heading to the city of the dead as I had written it but heading south across the shallow sea to bring communion to the predators and their prey.

"What do we do now?"

"Pray."

Night had come by now. I was uncertain how long a day was here or if time passed at all in the world, not of dreams nor idle fancies.

The empty country of the north was not desert but plains which shifted from savanna to barren prairie back to savanna.

"Pray to whom?"

Since time was meaningless here it did not seem unusual for her to have waited so long to ask.

"To whatever gods you believe in I suppose."

A fire had formed by now. Some of the grass willed themselves to burn and so they did.

In the act of will they ceased to be.

Jael sat opposite me across the fire.

"What gods do you believe in?" she asked.

"I don't know. I used to believe there were deities, a deity, something to keep the universe in order, to keep it right. A balanced watch fashioned by a watchmaker. But the war changed all that."

"She is right you know."

"Right?"

"To the reader, it must seem incredulous. You don't seem to have been truly traumatized by what you saw. You seem calm."

"Calm."

I echo the word. Of course, all this is mine so I have to narrate it and narrators are not allowed to be too emotional.

"If you are the narrator does that make you a god here?"

"I don't think so."

"The reader then? Is the reader reading this a god?"

"Perhaps. The one beyond who is scanning my words, your words, the walker between the worlds, he or she can imagine us as anything. You may be a delusion, I delusional or all this is real and Traija never was. You know our Traija, the Traija where you died is not on any map the reader will know of. And even if there is such a place it will not be the same place or have the same history."

"Back to the deities then, assuming the reader is one. What others are there, that you believed in?"

"I can't remember," I say quietly, half to myself and half to her.

"That seems impossible."

"It's true. All the deities were washed out of existence on the last day of the war. All the temples perished, all the stones bled, all the religious texts caught fire, turned into pigeons, and smouldered into ashes. I was there. I saw it. I saw gods die."

"Then why pray to them? Why even mention praying at all?"

"If we pray to a god it exists. If we imagine a god is there then in the country of our mind it is there. Here is she. She is there."

"If we imagine someone is reading us, have we created this reader even before our book is read? If the words came first and the reader came after, did we make him, or her, or did she or he make us?"

"It is impossible to say. That is what faith is for."

"What do we do now, after we say our prayers?"

"Have we said our prayers?"

"Let's pretend we have."

"Then we wait for something to happen."

"Why are we not in the country of the waxwings or the spiders or the velvet worms? Or the ants? We travelled across my world but here we've confined ourselves to a small circumference of ground. Why?"

"I need time to think. I need time for her to go to the city of the dead. Until she does the world is stopped. Everything else is frozen in place, a lost moment recaptured in amber."

"When she goes there," and here I point to the city in the distance, "we can move and not until."

"And if she never reaches the city?"

"Then our prayers are in vain and all things stop here."

A glint of silver was seen by now. In the shadow of the ocean moon where sea slugs dwelled striding across the water on sapphire skin, I watched this glint emerge from the south, going north again.

"What is happening?"

"I think our prayers are being answered."

In a moment Hijraelis had reached the maw-gate, opened them, closed them and we were carried from our time by the fire to the house at the city's heart.

Waiting for her.

And here she came.

She saw me, us, glanced away in disgust and opened the door.

And winter came.

I thought there would be more but the words ended here.

Chapter 6
I'll emerge suspended
like a chrysalis in amber

"Are you now or have you ever been . . .?"

The house had sped away, leaving only a bed. The bed had softened against her features leaving an imprint of herself when she left it, sliding her feet over the side feeling the cold hard plastic of the floor slowly warm itself at the touch of her.

The phrase repeated.

She turned to look at the bed, at the snow-soft features, at the pillow which curled like wings newly formed from out a chrysalis.

She stood, feeling the weight of her body press down against herself.

The city was still in her head and the world. No, worlds. No, more. She made a silent prayer to those of Yvragraine and took a step. Then another. The room revealed itself an inch at a time.

The winter shade of the floor and walls was the same, behind her beyond the bed a window, and beyond the window a city.

She moved her legs slowly, letting herself feel those feet which were not her feet at all. Gazing at her hand it was not her hand. Had too many fingers.

Circling the bed she went to the window. The city beyond was not her city, nor the city of the dead.

It was squat but not misshapen. The buildings were only a few storeys high coloured neither bright nor grey but white, green, red, and blue.

Below the window she gazed to see a street below, not the streets of the city of the dead nor the streets of her people, for these were broad and grey and sloughed along the ground like maggots . . . she caught herself in hearing this new word.

Then at the perfectly wrong moment, the trick of the sun occurred and the window became briefly a mirror and she was caught

staring at herself.

Naked body but soft with extra layers and eyes too small and a mouth positioned like the horizon which was not her mouth at all and fingers ending in limbs which only bent slightly and breasts and skin which could be cut not shattered and . . .

A new word entered her consciousness.

Breasts.

Thinking back another word emerged. Beetle. She had said this, speaking of the galgeirim but the word she had used, beetle, had no meaning before.

Now she understood it. The image of a rounded creature emerged in her mind, six legs and a pair of mandibles jutting forward, black eyes glistening in the sun beneath the stems of ancient plants as transparent as her former self.

The phrase came to her again.

Turning in disgust from her reflection she examined the room.

"Wasn't this . . ."

"Yeah. This was the tale of Yvragraine I acquired for you."

Hijraelis examines the room. We are there and Jael looks out the window to see the red and green and blue city beyond. She, Hijraelis, stares at me and then leaves the bed chamber.

We follow.

A man is in the kitchen.

He looks like me.

He is writing.

"Ah, you are awake. Have a seat."

Nakedly our Hijraelis sits.

"Yvragraine," he says idly, handing a piece of paper to her, "what do you think of the title?"

Glancing down she noticed it was a poem. And the title of the poem was something familiar to her.

"I . . . do . . . not know," she says, each word gaining

strength from the last.

"That's alright. I can always try again."

We observe the scene. Hijraelis is uncomfortable in a woman's skin. It had not occurred to me until now that my words and his could flow together like this. Some greater hand than mine had its own greater game played here.

"No," Jael says, "it's just you. Don't be absurdist."

"You mean absurd."

"I know what I said."

"Who am I?" Hijraelis asks.

"You are a young woman sitting before me."

"Who are you?"

"I am a young . . ." At this, Jael laughed slightly. I was not happy about this disparagement of my age, "man, penning a novel. This poem is the seed of my novel. What do you think of it?"

"I was in Hlyagathica. I had wings. I had jewels for eyes and my skin was glass. Where am I now? What am I now?"

"Ah yes, Hlyagathica again. Come get dressed and I will explain all. Your two friends can come as well. Yes, I can see you both. Get dressed, hurry up."

"I've never needed clothes before."

"Our Miss Jael will help. Won't you my dear? And while you get dressed Carnoton and I will talk. Here."

Hijraelis and Jael then left the room. Perhaps they folded themselves out of it. I do not know. My eyes were focused only on myself.

"Who are you?"

"A shadow. A reflection of a shadow I suppose. You know there are entire cities composed of only one person divided and divided into foreign skin, leech daughters with sunken boneless faces, and beetles which sometimes have faces like those of men."

"You know why I am here?"

"Of course. A poem transcribed into a novel. Same as why I am here."

"May I see your poem?"

"Of course."

It is titled *Yvragraine*.

"My magnum opus, never finished. Until soon. Not now, but adjacent to now, to you."

"Am I to write this too?"

"You are inside the stories my friend, a better vantage point. Better way to see how the mechanisms all run."

"Am I your friend?"

"If you aren't friends with yourself, who are you friends with?"

"Perhaps I should have said are you, my friend?"

"Same difference."

"This hardly looks like a paradise. And you do not look like a bird."

"No. This is not *Yvragraine* itself, merely the prologue. After the poem I was supposed to write a lengthy prologue, then an introduction, then the first chapter. It was supposed to be titled *War Hymns*. Since the trade however you are to be the new author so this changes things. Events that were supposed to happen haven't, or won't, least not the way they were meant to be."

The women emerge, Hijraelis wearing a dress.

"It feels like a chrysalis," she says.

"Well, let us go and see this new world that has such people in it."

We left.

Because this was meant to be the prologue it did not feature the story proper.

Hijraelis was disappointed. The city of the dead was supposed to lead to some grand truth. Arriving as a woman with

a mouth of teeth, hair like spider silk, and eyes too small for a face too wide upset her. But she did not show it, not exactly.

Lacking the proper expressions, her face a foreign country for her to occupy it was impossible for a smile to mean a smile or tears to mean tears so even though I knew she suffered she couldn't express it properly herself.

"What city is this?" I ask.

"It is our city, the last human city in all existence before the death of mankind."

"Where is Yvragraine?"

"It is exactly," and here he points ahead, "one million years that way."

As we walk, I notice no people there, nor anywhere.

"So where is everyone?"

"Transformed into threads and insects and spiders and worms. That is your idea, half-formed."

"Finish it for me then."

"I needn't have to. I need only explain a few details and allow you to fill in the gaps."

"What happened?" Hijraelis asks. "How did we end up here?"

"You asked why he is here, yes? Now you ask why you are here. I will tell you why you are here when he tells you why he is here. And as we probe the inner workings of the troubled mind, I will show off this last great city of mankind. Deal?"

"Fine," we all say in unison, begging credulity.

"So, the tour."

First the museums. There are housed endless statues of men and women. In the dream logic, and being the last human beings alive, I take a few small pieces as does Hijraelis.

"All the history of the world condensed to a few dark rooms. Look, you can see portraits of kings here. My how ugly

they all were."

"Kings?" Hijraelis asks.

"Why yes, leaders. Born to rule, that sort of thing. Queens too. Pharaohs, emperors, etc. A single individual telling millions of other individuals how exactly to lead their lives and when exactly to die. And all that remains are a few specimens under glass, pinned. Glorious, isn't it?"

He leads us to plazas where children used to play.

One could almost see the ghosts of the children before the fire came and swept it all away.

"How many people lived here?"

"Eleven million, or more."

"And this is the last?"

"Oh, humanity endures. Up there. Your Hlyagathica is one such place, your Mufisdoon another. But Earth is gone and only I remain. Only I remember there ever was an Earth here."

He leads us to the shoreline and the dead who cannot be counted anymore. An endless monument of bones juts from the ground like dragons across the wastelands of Kor Korak.

"Good, I'm glad you notice the symbolism, beasts, and men lying together in eternity. I think dear boy you should answer her question now."

"Why am I here?"

"Yes please."

Why am I here? A story? That's all this really is, after all, just my story. I'm narrating it. It doesn't matter how torturous the route is, I have control over it. I decide what is kept and what is abandoned, I choose what remains and who does not . . .

What does not.

"Who does not."

Who does not.

I am in an office building, they following. It looks . . . it looks like the office building from the war. There are ghosts here,

wraiths performing the labours they did in life.

I sit at my desk.

Your name is there.

Her name is there.

Jael Isih.

You died in the siege of Traija. You died in the siege of Traija. You died in the siege of Traija . . .

"We ordered . . . I ordered artillery. That was it. I made the requisition form for that." I feel my face. It feels cold. "Not artillery. Not machinery." I stare at her name. In Traija many of the intelligentsia were selected for execution. It was a way of demoralizing the enemy. Traija was ours during the war. Not before, not after. Just during.

Her name was on that list of people to be selected, to be hunted.

I never hunted her. You. I just notarized the list of people someone had already chosen who deserved to die. If I hadn't someone else would.

"Someone else did."

Another man sits in my seat with me still there. I am beneath his skin now seeing through the blurry mist-blue of his eyes as he takes my pen and draws up the form, then departs. Leaving me behind.

"Does it feel better, imagining someone else had done it? That you were not responsible?"

"No."

"Why not? A simple change of name, of face, and you did not write the form, did not link the chain. Is that not enough? If one does not do this deed is that not bliss, is that not paradise to know one has not committed the crime?"

"But I could have acted."

"Could you have?" By now I cannot tell who is speaking, Jael or Hijraelis or me who is not me.

"I could have done something more. I could have saved one person, or two, or twelve, or everyone. I didn't."

"You had a gun to your head."

"She had a gun to her head. I had an office building full of bureaucrats. They don't balance out."

"Why are you here then?" I know now it is the other me who is asking.

"Because here I have the chance to make amends. If I get the formula right, if I construct the right words, the right world, if I take this speech and twist it enough times, if I believe in it enough times then it will be like none of it ever happened. If life is a tale a tale can be retold and improved upon until what really happened never happened. If no one remembers something it's like it never existed at all."

"And can you make amends through this? Is that enough to bring back the dead?"

I stare at Jael. I know.

"No."

I look to him now. To myself. He is rotting through. I remember the collection I read as a boy about life in the under-glass. It wasn't just one story. All of them held the same theme.

One imagined a time when humanity could divest itself of its sins, and scatter them into other races and across other worlds. They would turn complex beings into warriors or things of pride or beasts of lust until hollowed-out mankind was pristine like a statue under glass.

Or another where they simply excised body parts away, cut eyes and ears, and replaced them with alien things until one couldn't tell the alien from the human. And it was better that way since to be human was simply not to be . . . humane.

He is rotting through, his face sunken in, eyes yellowed like parchment-glass. Teeth falling out.

He is me.

I am him.

Jael is there. Hijraelis is there. She should hate me. Perhaps she does. Perhaps her last word was my name cursed and smeared across her lips. But she didn't even know my name. I was nothing but her execution to her. Not even that.

Just a name on a page.

I should cry. Perhaps I did. I should pray to some old god but all their names are forgotten. Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? Who am . . .

I stop.

I think I die.

I awaken in bed, the imprint of my body upon it.

Hijraelis and Jael are over me. My self is gone.

"How did I get here?"

"It's a story. We just moved to the next scene," Jael said.

"Where is me?"

"Gone, like you said four sentences previous."

"Where did he go?"

"Just away."

I get up out of bed and feel myself slowly falling apart. My bones are melting beneath my skin.

I know what he would have said now, so I can answer Hijraelis.

And I do.

"You are here because fiction is the thin membrane that keeps humanity sane. You are here at this point to bridge one work into another to keep me sane and make me pay for my crimes."

"I thought the victors already knew your crimes."

"They do. But like you said the mask falls away. And beneath it, I'm a monster. I'm the villain."

"Does that mean you will try to end us?" Jael asks.

"I'm a monster in remission," I say. "So, no. Instead, let's go forward a million years to Yvragraine, link this together, return the way we came, leave the city of the dead, and then there's only one thread left."

"Sam's."

"Sam's."

So, the centuries gave way.

Earth transformed herself.

The cities bled to rivers of stone rotting into sand.

The birds of the air transformed themselves, grew hands, their legs grew long, their faces drawn to almost human shape.

All memory of humanity was lost.

But not forgotten.

In time the name shifted to Yvragraine. I hadn't realized till now that Yvragraine was the name of the poet's lover who stole my face.

In time moonstone towers and eyries grew and the children of Yvragraine emerged. I could see, we could see them all.

Our skin grew feathers and our hands distended, fingers elongating like the wing bones of birds.

I forgot to be myself a time. They forgot.

During this interlude, all the former things passed away. I had never been a clerk nor human and they did they know conflict nor hate nor fear.

But I cannot describe it. I can describe them, I can describe their eyries, their nests. Perhaps Jael could do better, or Hijraelis. I do not know. Perhaps when they tell their stories they will include this time better written than I have written it.

The problem is speech is predicated upon by what we know. If you eliminate a word, it's like a gap in your mind. In this

world of Yvragraine we soared above moonstone seas where mountains turned to oceans, where jungles crystallized into spider webs.

Those of Yvragraine spoke but their language held no words of hating, warring, sickening, or conflict. Imagine a language where words like “up” or “down” do not exist, where directions and boundaries you know are not.

During the time of this Eden which never fell most of my language splintered into nouns. Stone, flesh, body, tree, jungle, home.

Their entire speech was this, verbless poetry of Martian things. It's impossible to convey it perfectly here.

Then a few splintered off going to Sbtharthyl, knowing in those black valleys the taste of violence, of war. Verbs began here.

I could speak, we could speak but the black speech of the goulaooss corrupted us. And I saw Jael as a raven, or Hijraelis, and wished to devour her, rape her, destroy her, and rising to the skies over those black valleys cried out my vengeance-violence like a wave. And fell.

Did I hurt them? No.

But in some alternate space, I imagined I had and imagined seeing their bodies broken neath my hands like the feathered fingers of a hawk.

But it was an illusion. I am certain of it. I am hopeful of it.

When I ask them later, they say all they saw was me rising to the skies and falling, crashing to the ground, breaking my wings against the stones.

My wings are broken so I am compelled to believe them.

Turning back to Yvragraine I realize with horror a detail he only hinted at.

Kings.

They have no kings in Yvragraine nor even do they have the names of kings in Sbtharthyl. The strong rule in the black

valleys while by the moonstone shores all rule and words like “weak” or “strong” do not exist.

Is that paradise then? Is that the equation of Eden? Is to be in paradise to have no hand over you nor have not your hand over another? Is to be in hell to be lorded over, or be the lord of another? Is hell simply the rubric of knowing your life is not merely yours?

We spent time in the black valleys listening to the screams of the walking wounded.

We spent time by the moonstone shore listening to the war hymns become hymns of peace. They had names there but in a raven’s tongue, I cannot produce them here. They had wisdom there but in a language without action, I cannot describe it.

And in Sbtharthyl all logic was rendered a single phrase.

What is mine is all, and all is mine.

We passed the way we came after a few generations, reincarnating between one state and another, feeling myself crushed neath the air in both places while Jael hungered for her story’s end and Hijraelis hungered to return to Hlyagathica.

In time we did.

Then the bedroom, sleep, arriving in the city of the dead, a tour of the southern world and the city of the waxwings.

I will mention more of this in a later passage. The one after chapter six. After this, there remained only Sam’s story to go.

I paused here, asking Jael if she was satisfied so far.

“Are you?” she asks.

I touch my face. It is no longer there. I cannot feel my skin nor touch my mouth. I gaze down and my body is no longer . . . human.

“Yes, I am satisfied,” I say.

“Liar,” she says quietly.

Of course, we have not resolved Hijraelis’ story yet. I can

see the twist now. I can see how her thoughts play out.

But instead, Sam calls me back.

He is saving his story for another day.

And cursing my luck I know I will have to go into the
world of my home naked now.

My mask has fallen clean away.

Chapter 7

The black decayed god

I dress quietly for work.

He pulled me out before we could address his story.

Should have guessed as much.

"When will I be allowed . . .?"

"Next chapter," he says, "just as you said."

Jael has folded herself out of the room. I do not know where she has gone right now.

I dress, touching my face, feeling it not really there. I open the door of my apartment, and leave, having Sam standing before me when a moment ago he was behind me, still in my room.

"Let's get to work," he says.

We do.

Miss Crave is reviewing my work. Since I am narrating these pages in one state or another they exist. They have substance and weight.

They are.

And by whatever medium they are she can discern them. Which she is doing now.

She reaches the part where I wrote "she is doing now" and then stops.

"Have you anything more to add?"

"Just our conversation which is happening now. Then I will go back to work."

"This other country, Yvragraine, and the other one, Sbtharthyl, you say you got them from this other writer, yes?"

"Yes."

"So why is it mentioned in your words before you acquired it?"

I go to her desk and I see it.

I used these words myself when I began.

It's a bit confusing to me.

"I'll say. I'm confused myself." Crave looks up at me. "So did you acquire Yvragraine from this other writer or did you merely invent this other writer and then acquire 'his' idea?"

"I'll know in a few paragraphs maybe. Not sure it matters. How about my crimes?"

"We already knew what you'd done before. You're an open book after all. Admitting your crimes is good. Not sure who it is good for. Beyond that, I need only ask how long it will take to finish things."

"I don't know. Sam stopped me from seeing what he wrote. Suppose I'll see it tonight."

"More likely you will go tonight to *Ale's House*. You said this other writer used your name in a . . . bad way, some cursed thing, yes? Well after work I'm ordering you to tell the reader what exactly he said."

"Of course you are."

"When it's all done, you'll let me know."

"When it's all done everyone will know. And nothing will be left."

I left.

Ale's House, after work.

And he is there. Reciting. And since his tale does lead into the next chapter even though I backstep, I might as well tell it here.

He is up on stage talking about Hlyagathica. My Hlyagathica. And it goes like this.

"So, in those perfumed countries, human skin gave way into the skin of animals. Spiders, worms, etc. And Hijraelis went seeking in the city of the dead."

"Now the city was the last remnant of all human things since humanity had machines so tiny they looked like grains of sand. And with a thought, a man could build a statue or a weapon or a song-maker or a song. These sand dominators were the instruments of humanity but they had all broken down except for the final city lying on the outcropping of the barren hill

"So, she finds in the city the record of the Carnotons, savage monstrous things. Rapists, sadists, cruel beasts of fur and fangs who towered over human forms and with their bone-smooth jaws would rip flesh apart at a glance.

"These Carnotons warred with mankind but only mankind. So, the solution was here. They flesh-tailored themselves, turning their descendants into other things and the Carnotons followed but seeing no sign of humanity simply waited.

"And by the 108th generation all trace of the Carnotons were gone.

"Leaving the city of the dead she saw small nodules of flesh no larger than her fist slowly crawling away, grey-green corpse-skinned eyeless things.

"These maggots preyed upon the dead and could be found in all the places of the world. And gazing caught a glimpse of bone-smooth jaws, realizing these were the Carnotons, the beasts who had shifted mankind into alien shape to avoid their final death.

"Realizing this she went south, journeying to the ziggurats of a vanished Mu known as Ariahria, wandering among people like velvet worms, their faces sunken in, fire-weaving threads from off their bodies into death. And she allowed herself to be baptized in their cocoon, placed in the deepest crypt, and after 108 days there emerged the first woman upon all of Hlygathica in untold countless years."

Here he stops and there is the sound of applause.

It is a good piece neatly told. Of course, this is merely the synopsis. The actual performance took over four hours, he making

loving details of everything from her physical appearance to each street to the exact dimensions of a Carnoton.

I am just providing a condensed version in the condensed room of my own narrative here.

Afterward, I asked him why he had made me the villain and he smiled and said words to the effect of every writer is the villain of their own books.

If a writer was not in some way a villain, then their books would never know conflict nor would their characters know suffering or want. Any writer who could not accept themselves as such would not make a world but only a scene, something pristine and crystalline no one would care about. If a writer was not in some way a villain their books would describe Yvragraine . . .

"Where did you get the name?" I ask.

"She was my wife before the war."

"And Sbtharthyl?"

"She was my wife during the war," he added and then showed his hand. The tan remained but the ring itself was lost.

"What happened to them?"

"The war," he said simply and walked on.

Knowing he existed I wondered if perhaps I had simply heard him talking about them and then subconsciously added their names into my own story somehow . . .

"It is all one story," he said, back turned to me, "and there is no difference between your words and mine. All are reaching the end."

I went to him, turned him around, and asked him to repeat what he said. He said he had said nothing though.

I was forced to believe him, then turned and went on my way again.

"This part of the novel feels short," Jael says.

"It is. It is finished in a few more lines."

"You are going back to Hlyagathica?"

"I'm going to use a flashback. We will present the next chapter as taking place before this one. It's a simple technique."

"And then."

"Then Sam. After that, I finish. I fall. Whole world might fall."

"If I could take it back I wouldn't," she says.

"What do you mean?"

"If this ends everything then everything deserves to end."

"Is that you talking, or Hijraelis, or me?"

"You're the narrator. You tell . . ."

Ends.

Chapter 8

The hollowlands

We moved from the nest cities of the ants to the jungles of thread the spiders wove. They strode about. I could see them. The ants wore chitinous black armour and in the dark, I felt them moving, needle-thin hands probing me.

The spiders in comparison were lumbering titans, eight limbs stalking countries they had built in mockery of Ixelira.

And we journeyed the rune-lands of women with sunken faces and boneless bodies whose corpse skin blackened ashen-wise

or was grey while their speech burnt the air a time.

This was the moment of past tense. Behind me in the previous chapter was the future and after this chapter yet another point of future tense. Jael had wandered with me for the moment saying nothing. I spoke.

"I see it now. My part in this. What I couldn't see before. Imagine this world is not some vast chamber to save mankind and these creatures are not the children of men at all."

"They are only beasts then?"

"No." I turned to stare her full in the face. "They are not creatures at all."

We flickered from the north to the south and back. A moment a league's span. I could see the ziggurats and the priests adorned with scars along their bodies and the waxwings tailoring lovers to give birth to lesser monstrosities than themselves.

Then I drew back the curtain and we saw.

In my work, the great reveal was that these were human beings. It was a delusion, a madness. Hijraelis did not have wings of her own. They were separate from her, machines her people used to fly. The spiders and ants were not given extra limbs and they on far Ixelira were not threads nor crystalline jungles. They

were flesh, men, and women who could not accept being human.

This was an asylum for the mentally distorted and the city of the dead simply where one was allowed to vacate the premises.

And we were there. We crossed the maw-gate, I leading, she following, came to the ziggurat, ascended the thousand steps, and at the top, time passing quickly now, we descended into the dark. And there they were, images suspended on walls showing how each creature truly looked.

Hijraelis lacked sapphire eyes. Lacked glass-transparent skin. She looked like Jael. And beside her on the wall my body was. I was. Somewhere beyond something like me was stalking in the delusion of an alien guise.

"This is my story and this is how it ends. She walks down the steps, comes here, sees her flesh, the true image of it, and knows it's all just in her head.

"Then she leaves, goes back to the house, awakens in a bed, and forgets ever being an insect at all. The dream is broken at last and the last image is of her dressing for work. Like a normal human being."

"And of my work?"

"Mufisdoon is the poem she was writing, subconscious awareness of the last human thing in her life. Her mother began the poem, she finished it and left it for the others. There in the waxwing city, one piece of fiction is buried inside another.

"Hijraelis simply awakens and goes to work in the city when it was still full of human beings. I don't know when that was but it hardly matters now.

"The work is done."

"And what of Sam's story? How will you add that?"

"This is the end. Sam's story will be the epilogue, one extended over several chapters."

"Will this satisfy the reader?"

"I don't care if it satisfies the reader. Will it satisfy *you*?"

"I won't know until the end."

"Then let's get to the end."

We left the hollowlands where stories finish themselves, that void after a book is done and the reader is left pondering what it all meant, replaying back to the previous chapter then moving ahead, both chapters existing after this one.

One could simply call this the end. You don't have to read any further. Here is the realization after all that some wish to be anything but human, those who would rather spend their time in madness and false guises than accept the truth.

You could end the story here, since this ends too.

Chapter 9

The glass-skinned king

I dressed for work but it being a holiday had nowhere to go. The victors had selected it since this was the day of their victory over us.

I ate a quick meal of bread and milk and honey, real bread and milk and honey this time, being provided by my employer.

Sam folded himself into the room.

I looked at the notes on the table. His notes. His story.

"I suppose it's my turn now," he says.

I nod.

Dressed for work with no place to go, I begin.

There are different versions and different unfinished pieces. There is supposed to be one but when you're dead you have forever to see how myriad places run, how one tale becomes a facet of a prism moving in all directions simultaneously.

In one version, in one piece all mankind was swept off the Earth. An alien race needed our oceans and so they traded, giving us their worlds while taking our own.

You'd see, if you could, great swarms of aquatic insects the size of men spanning the oceans only to molt and rise into swarms of aerial beasts while on some desolate outcropping would be all of a human city, someplace where the maps don't show.

That was one piece.

Another was of two ancient races, one devoted to order and the other chaos observing mankind, watching us, little knowing we were the parents of them. We guided them, pretending ourselves ignorant, shepherding them, pretending we couldn't see them out the corners of our eyes until one day we revealed ourselves to them as their true progenitors and disgusted to know they were not the gods they thought they were but only

the children of us they fled into void, and never returned.
And all this time gave way to the gods of the suns.

He is speaking now.

I am listening.

He is sitting before me at the kitchen table staring into space and Jael is by him, putting her hand atop his own and he is speaking. He is speaking the words he never wanted to.

But being haunted by her and I he has no choice now.

"In the beginning, there was not one universe but two. In one lay all that was good, all that was right and proper, and in the other lay all evil.

"Across infinite waters and infinite lands, beneath infinite suns lay worlds ruled by deities, each world a deity assigned to it. And in the universe of light those gods were creatures of light and in the universe of dark those gods were creatures of night.

"They were not even gods so much as demons there, housed in the grimoire of their black broken universe, twisting their creations into nightmares."

As he speaks the kitchen gives way, walls melt and we are sitting in the dawn of another universe. I stare up and I see a green sun pouring its light down and in the malachite jungles and gardens I hear cicadas tattooing their violence into the air.

"They had names. Uncounted names. By the end, only nineteen were left but in the beginning, they held infinity. Their names were a billion syllables long for each of them. One could spend forever just reaching the end of a name, feeling every nuance of their being wash over you."

Centipedes arrive now, glisten-bodied creatures whose armour smokes in the humidity. Their golden mouths open and close as if repeating a sad refrain.

"Nineteen remained by the end. Only nineteen.

"They of the dark sought to kill those of the light, and

there was a door between the cities light and dark, each city being an entire cosmology. So sometimes a sliver of the evil would slip through and a good person would commit a crime, at first a simple thing, a lie, a taste of greed bitter as ash.

"Then more, finally leading to murder. Entire worlds could be murdered, their deities forgotten.

"But those on the other darker side perished too. You'd see none knew then but those of the dark and the light they were the same, merely divided, separated by the thin thread of a boundary line, and as more slipped between so they became one and perished as one, selfsame.

"Finally, the remaining nineteen decided to seek out the Ender of Things."

The jungle gave way and the centipedes, and there came a long procession.

While this was happening, I realized we were also upon worlds of ocean and shadow listening to women made of smoke and ash and night who were singing songs of dusk or watching the sailors upon their seas wine dark bright who drew up from the ocean mermaids that they feasted on whose scales went winnowing like sapphire serpent eyes.

I saw the procession of them, each shimmering like a sun passing from the jungle to the ziggurat which flickered into existence where my eyes saw them come.

He named them. When his words end, I will name them for you but for now know that each was like summer or autumn condensed to a human form, a garden given a woman's skin or leaves or twig-thin limbs suddenly distorted to human hands.

They passed upward into the ziggurat and were gone.

"But though they sought out this Ender of Things it fled, never to be found again. The last remnant of existence was left alone with only the remembrance of all the trillions of things lost, both in the light and the dark, while they in the dark," and here

the universe twisted sideways and I saw demons wailing in their black obelisks over feasts of bones, “were likewise left to ponder the brief mystery of what was gone, never to be regained. Not till the Ender swept out the last train of its garments, or the last shadow its wing.”

The kitchen regained its flesh and we were returned to it.

Sam mentioned a brothel he wished to go to but though he folded himself away I knew he was not going there.

He was going to someone’s grave.

Whose name might have been my own.

Their names. Yes, I said I would give their names. There was Kirema, Arjiada, Calcalsalis, Apiryx, Meireb, Iliathrixia, Ijarilia . . .

“What are you doing?”

“I’m giving the reader their names.”

“Why?”

“They don’t know them. Nineteen names, nineteen gods of the suns . . .”

“Nineteen chapters in this book.”

“True. Let me finish.”

“Sure.”

“ . . . Kinhasa and Kinshasa, Teretza, Caldospairia, Auroxilis . . .”

“That’s twelve.”

“I know.”

“He didn’t mention the other seven.”

I look at my notes. She’s right. I can’t finish the list of names.

“You can always add your own.”

“That wouldn’t be his story though, would it?”

“It’s not his story now. It’s ours.”

I think a moment and then decide to add a few more.

“Yvragraine and Sbtharthyl. Myriooku and Yeirsea. Moriea, Jael . . . and Carnoton. These were the lords of creation who sought the end of things.”

I take out my typewriter and spend a morning in the underlands and overlands of Sam’s last tale. I visit not only jungles and oceans and shadows but also rune temples and listen to the war hymns of savage-winged things. Jael is there. Listening. Speaking. I listening. I speaking.

I place his fiction at the end of my own, at the end of the realization that the aliens are human. I place this epilogue and explain the infinite races who fell, the centipedes or the caecilians writhing in the mud seas with their transparent dark skins breathing, that all of them in time evolved to human beings or close enough to human beings it would be impossible to tell the difference anymore.

I place the poem about Mufisdoon as part of the prologue, give a few chapters describing her universe, then my own, then the other writer’s, explaining how the hallucinogenic narrative is the product of a writer going slowly mad, how he is grasping at straws while sitting alone in a desert, the last man who ever lived knowing all flesh perished but him.

Sam arrives, looks over the story, grateful his name is not attached to it, then departs. Perhaps I never see him again. Perhaps he is in the next chapter.

I’m not certain now.

Why do his words upset him so? you’ll ask, or if you don’t ask, I’ll ask it for you.

Sam Thistle was on the winning side of the war right up until he came to work for my government. He abandoned all else, everything to come here because he believed with all his might in some cause, some wicked little cause that plunged four nations into extinction and millions to the ovens.

Can you imagine being on the right side of history for once,

just once, then deciding on a whim to throw it all away? It's like standing on Eden feeling the beast inside tempt you then walking away and just at the final moment saying you'd rather retreat, go back the way you came, and fall. For no reason at all. Not because you were tempted, not for wealth, not even for ideology, just a whim one day, a trick of the wind, because of something you couldn't even name.

But in his last work, it occurred to him that even were he on the light side of creation, if even *some* sliver remained and he could have donned the black mask and done what he did . . . if the chance was there, was he ever righteous at all?

On the other side of the firing line could he ever be saved?

But as I said before there is only what was, not what could have been.

I spent an afternoon inside the skull of a dead man, metaphorically of course, penned it up, put it in an envelope, sat on my bed, and almost wept.

Almost. Not quite.

Then went for a walk and saw nothing of importance at all.

Chapter 10
In all the burning
cities of our dreams

"So, I see you finished. And several chapters ahead."

Moriea Crave is reading all I wrote and I notice the grey panelling of the walls, the oblong shape of her desk, her hair which I haven't noticed but is slightly greying at the edges, and her sharp eyes even behind her glasses.

The season of her time as a killer has passed, I realize. She cannot be a sniper anymore. She cannot look through the sights of a rifle to extinguish a life. That part of her life is over. It cannot ever be brought back.

"I think I have done as you asked."

"You have. This provides an excellent contrast, a hypothetical might-have-been. Is Miss Isih still with you now?"

"I don't know. I think there are a few chapters left. I can't tell."

"Understandable."

"What am I to do now? As I wrote it the epilogue should be a few chapters so this should encompass it, but his work is done, shortened. I had anticipated it being longer."

"Why is it shortened?"

"The Ender of Things was never found. I assumed I would be privy to some detail regarding it but it's not really in his notes. No clue what it's supposed to mean or be. It's conspicuous by its absence."

"If you could find this Ender of Things yourself, that would be an excellent conclusion, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know. Is that what you want me to do now? Go trailing over the snippet of a dead man's mythology?"

"You could always describe our city, our country in more detail. I'm sure the reader would like to know the history of our

illustrious land."

"It's not your land. It's ours."

"It was yours but being unfinished it became ours. What do you think happened here? You were given the same opportunity as everyone else, the same chance, the same choice. You could have chosen anything, be anything, become anything. Instead, you became this. You reduced yourself to this."

"I know."

"Before the war, during the war, after the war. What have you been? You are naked now, exposed. But I don't see you being a different person. Not truly. Weren't you told when you faced the truth that you'd become something else and cease to be what you are?"

"I faced the truth."

"But you are still you. Why not take a few paragraphs and tell the reader all about the history of our unfinished world. Start there. Then when you have the time seek out the Ender of Things. Pretend to be pleasantly surprised."

"Is that all?"

"No. Dear reader," and here she addresses the air, in your general direction, "it has come to my attention that you are trying to read this novel here. And I imagine you are confused. Stories begin and end. Characters act strangely. Obviously at some point, assuming this book is read by enough people, some lofty critic will claim either the genius or madness of this particular text.

"So let me simplify it all for you. This is the denouncement of a man who hasn't figured out being the narrator is not the same as being. It is the realization that it is impossible to simply tell a piece of something to someone else. Writing is revealing, it reveals the scope, measure and dimension of the writer upon the page and upon your mind.

"As such a fiction does not end, no more does a life. We all change in the facet of the prism of each other. That's all. Have a

nice day." She bid me leave.

And I left.

Our history then.

Our nation was founded roughly a century ago out of several smaller states. Our first leader was named Kuri, after a creature of mythology that had the misfortune to attach itself to wandering souls, drive them mad, compel them to the moors of its domain, and have its victims fall upon those selfsame moors and slowly fade away.

Kuri began a policy of expansion leading to the first, second, and third wars. These are not capitalized because they have actual names that I won't bore you with.

Our city is known as Caldospair and was briefly the capital to be replaced by another city to the south known as Asmyth.

Description. A perfect grid. The city is a square, rebuilt by the victors. They do so love order. All buildings are only three storeys high at most. All modern buildings have running water, electricity, etc. All old architecture is extinct. All paintings of our masters, in both senses of the word, were burnt or stolen back across the waters. As if they started there.

Beyond the city is a vast jungle imported from the south. One of our leaders thought it a charming conceit to place ourselves in a savage replica which, ironically, was not touched by war.

We thought ourselves so perfect in those days.

We thought we were the pinnacle of existence.

I went to a show once, saw a whole tribe of people behind cages, and laughed because I was allowed to laugh.

We thought ourselves so perfect in those days.

Mentioned the war a few times now. Not in detail. Not till now.

Our previous administration, slash regime, decided it was a good, proper, and noble thing to take the entire continent as our own. Our art was superior. Our people were superior. Our nation was superior.

We swarmed like ants, like worms across a rotting corpse. Our cities in those days were chaotically built affairs, jumbles of cubes jostled upon one another. I mention this because any child could easily knock over such a structure and so too our nation, seemingly secure and easily knocked over.

I saw my neighbours turned to ashes. I saw posters decrying parts of our country as needing to be weeded out.

Then came fire.

Our enemies from across the waters after seeing us turn people to smears of ash and fat released a fire of their own which licked at the edges of the jungles, where we were, turned them black, and turned my Caldospair into a graveyard.

We thought ourselves so perfect in those days.

I smiled in those days. I haven't smiled since.

Is that enough? Is that enough for you to know? Do you want my diary perhaps, each day spent notarizing lists of casualties about to happen? Do you want to know how I was recruited or why or when? Or perhaps you want to know how I went from a sewer to this, or after I was tried why they didn't hang me . . .

Did they hang me?

That would be a twist, wouldn't it? Myself dead all along, not realizing it.

Did they hang me?

I don't remember it, so for now I'll say they didn't, or if they did pretend.

Is all this the city of the dead?

Is all this just myself, myself as a city, each street merely the reflection of me, each window an eye, or each building a cell of

my body? Could that be it? Could that be an easy explanation for this place and my predicament?

I don't know.

But history ended when the war ended and our country is not our own. It belongs to them now. She's right. We were never finished, our lives left unfinished, some word missing, or words.

Mercy perhaps or empathy or, or . . . humanity.

Is that it? Was I never really human?

"Is this the history of your country or yourself?"

Both. Neither. I can't say.

After I talk and I work I leave.

There are supposed to be nine more chapters and I suppose this Ender of Things makes a good extension to my epilogue. I guess I'll look for it next and end things that way.

Chapter 11

The spy who is a city

"Are you now or have you ever been . . .?"

I am sitting in A's apartment listening to writers discussing stories. I explained to them what I'd been doing the last few days.

"Who is this Ender of Things?"

"Character in Sam's story."

"The story he never finished."

"Yeah."

"Why look for him?"

"Not sure it is a him. Might just be an it."

A is listening. I said before A is a man but disliking what I said A now claims I shouldn't mention gender at all. So just ignore I said A was a man and pretend A could be anyone.

"I would think you've finished it all," A says. "Wasn't the whole point seeing what Jael Isih would have written had she lived?"

"Yeah. And it's all done. All except this one piece but it's not essential to the plot. It's one of those little threads writers sometimes leave knowing readers will notice them but not enough to really question it."

"Why not just stop here?"

I could of course. This could be the end, again. I could be sitting talking to other writers, our voices trailing off, the city slowly rebuilding leaving just enough ambiguity for you to wonder if I'm dead, delusional, alive. That is the modern way people tell stories I find. You don't give them a complete plot, you meander, you thread things along and the more confusing you are the more brilliant some obscure critic claims.

But only after you're dead.

When you're alive you're just a fraud and no one really

cares about you at all.

"If I stop here, have I changed?"

"Have you changed? Who were you before the person you are now?"

I smiled. I used to smile. My face used to move along these grooves like gears, mouth sloping at this perfect angle, edges of my eyes folding back showing something I can't feel anymore.

"I used to smile."

"We all used to smile. Not sure if we ever have since the war."

Did B say that, or C or D? Or was it A? They are all blending together, a hydra with four heads or only two each as if it was just one life being shared down the middle, each half taking possession of one half of a body.

"What should I do?" I ask.

"Smile," someone says. One of them says.

I can't.

Sam could show up, or Jael. I don't think they will. I think the masks of them are done. But I'm not certain. The others talk awhile, I wait and afterward, A goes with me out the door.

Into the city of myself.

"How many of them do you think there are?"

"I don't know."

"How many stories have been written since the war?"

"A million, a billion. Can't say."

We are by the river now. We are standing by the railing and A is looking out across the river which years ago stank of burning human fat.

"Each of them could be a life you know, metamorphosized into words."

"Perhaps."

"Let me tell you something. This idea I've been having. I

imagine a woman loved by a man and she dies and she returns. Same woman, again and again living a mayfly's life, spending only a few days with this man.

"In this country of theirs, wherever there is, some calingi women exist or men living mayfly lives, growing and passing in hours and seconds the way our lives pass in years.

"So, she dies, she returns. The man ages slowly, slowly, but she doesn't, even though she dies in days. She remains the same woman of five and twenty as he becomes forty, fifty, sixty, and by the end, she is sitting beside the bed of this aging man, still beautiful, still dying in her beauty and he thinks to himself he loved her, always. Always. But the truth is he didn't love her. He loved them. Each of them was unique as a fingerprint even if they all looked selfsame.

"One was a bit bolder, another laughed more, another was sadder, another angrier. He loved them all, a multitude of women all similar and all different and all wearing the same face. What do you think?"

"A good story but why tell me?"

"Are you the woman who changed or the man who stayed the same? How many lives have you truly lived? How do you know you ever smiled before? Maybe you didn't exist before yesterday. Maybe tomorrow you will cease to exist and another will take your place and that other will smile, thinking he is you.

"Doesn't matter either way. In time we're all just memories of each other. Fading away."

We stood and waited for the dawn to come but it took too long, I half-imagined the dawn did not even exist, and we went and had some coffee at a café I hadn't even noticed before.

It might not even have existed before today.

The city of course, in being built by them is not our city anymore. The streets were burnt up and replaced. Maybe I am just

the city itself, rebuilt imperfectly with some streets of myself still missing.

When I go into the rooms are the walls watching me, walls of the eyes of myself?

I touch my face and touch the wall of my bedroom and wonder which is really me.

I lay on my bed, thinking of A's words.

"Are you now or have you ever been . . .?"

Tomorrow I will go looking for the city of the end of things.

Chapter 12

The islands of immortality

The camps. I went here today.

There was a tour so I went.

Left the city proper and went north. Passed a forest of barbed wire and went into the barracks which still stank of human skin rotting on half-living bone.

I've avoided this. I've tried to avoid all this.

There are ledgers we have. Crave has them. She has the fossil records of a holocaust in miniature. She can gaze over a book and be presented with the dimensions of a camp, of an atrocity. It's as simple as watching a doll's house burn.

Why with a few ledgers laid out she can plot the entire ruin of half a civilization.

Now I'm here, smeared to one of the pages she owns.

There are memories of hell here. I know it.

The tour guide looks suitably sad. She is being paid to do so but isn't from here. She can't know. She only pretends.

The horror and those nightmares instrumental in the horror are likewise written down. I stand in the barracks and count names. I made a litany of them.

Behind my eyes is a litany of rapes, of murders.

The dead are not here though. There are no ghosts here.

I should be able to see her, see inmate 211789. Her name was Oraelsyia Chaarn. She was a neighbour of mine.

I should be able to see her face here, withered, cursing me. But she isn't here.

I remember her hand in mine on my bed.

But she isn't here.

The memories of hell are here. But they are not.

Only we are left behind.

I make a longer tour in the long dark. I wait for the night. I

lie stretched out where she lay and feel it coming. The others have left, people I don't care about and so won't mention beyond that they were.

I wait for night. She comes.

But it isn't her.

What comes then? What is coming?

Who?

Jael enters the doors of the barracks and leads me by the hand and it is during the war again.

They are lined up outside, matchstick people starved to the point that their limbs are twig-thin, like Hijraelis in her empty countries flickering across the sky.

I am led to a small room with all the others and the door is closed I know the gas is coming I feel it Jael is there and we wait and wait until it is drowning us and I see the people screaming silently I know I am screaming now but it isn't enough somehow isn't enough because all this is past tense and I am waiting for something else . . .

I am lying on the barrack's bed smelling the mildew and half-rotted skin.

I get up. I walk out the maw-gate of the camp and in the dark through the forest of barbed wire head for the town.

Halfway between the two, I see the girl.

She is staring at a colony of ants by the roadside and it is moonlight out so everything is dark but yet still capable of being seen. She is wearing a long dress from an older time and she bent down, staring, and I stop and ask what she is doing in the dark.

"Listening to them talk," she says.

"What are they saying?"

"That they don't want to die. It's written in everything they say. Everything they do."

She looks up at me. She is no child. She is no woman. She is no ghost.

"You were looking for me, weren't you?"

"Are you the Ender of Things?"

"For a time. Then I will become something else, as I am needed. Shall we walk?"

So she puts her hand in mine and we depart, continuing our path toward the town whose name I don't know of, and therefore has no name.

Chapter 13
So full are you the
void cannot contain

"What are you looking for, in me?"

"An end I suppose."

"Why an end?"

"Because all things must end in time."

"But as all things end why do you need me?"

"I was asked to seek you out and so I shall. So, I do."

She laughs then. Laughs at my absurdity.

"Why do you laugh?" I ask.

"Because it is absurd," she says, and we walk on in silence for a time.

"I don't understand," I say finally, craning my head down to watch her as she listens.

"You don't, do you? That must be the most horrible thing in the world. If I told you to suffer, if I told you to feel what Chaarn felt, if I put her inside you, you would feel it? Yes?"

"Yes."

"And if I took from you your memories, if I simply told you they were gone never to be replaced, you would believe this too, would you not?"

"I would."

"Well, there's your problem. You are whatever other people say."

I felt the forest blacken a bit as if they were staring at me in pity or dread.

"What do you mean?"

"I do miss the sounds of all the people in the world. All the laughing children. All those women moaning for their lovers. You must miss that sound too. How long since you were intimate?"

"Before the war."

"Truthfully. If you can't be true to the end then you were never true at all."

"Never."

Chaarn slipped her hand from mine before our lovemaking began, said she had other things to do, and went on her way, closing the door quietly, leaving me alone in the long dark which seemed to never end.

"So, you never heard those sounds but I imagine you often missed not hearing them."

"I suppose so."

"Don't fucking suppose!" she shot at me violently.

"Accept!"

"I suppose so," I repeated as we walked, she calming down or trying her best to.

"God dammit you're a bad case, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"No, you don't really, do you?"

She stopped and went to a tree. I followed.

"Talk to it," she said.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Just say hi and let it talk it back to you."

"Hello."

"Hello," the tree said.

"The tree just said hello."

"No, it didn't. You didn't hear it say anything."

"Okay. I didn't hear it say anything."

"You just heard it speak!"

"You said it didn't."

"And why would you believe me? I'm a complete stranger to you."

I couldn't answer her.

"Let's keep walking," she continued and we did. "You are hopeless. Truly, truly hopeless."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Are you? If I said you weren't would you believe me? If I told you that you didn't exist, would you just happily say it was the truth even though your words prove otherwise?"

"I don't know. I'm supposed to change, I'm supposed to smile, I'm supposed to find you . . ."

"Who says? Who is saying you must do all this?"

"Moriea Crave, and A and Hijraelis and Jael . . ."

"A boss, a writer who can't get inside your head, a fictional character, and a dead woman. Wow, you have great advisers."

"Crave told me to extrapolate a poem, so I did."

"Yes, and along came a dead person to help you. Then the dead person gave you another challenge, which you did. And that led to another and another. All leading to me. To the Ender of Things. You know another word for that is death, right? Sam just hinted at death but he didn't say it, he didn't have to say oblivion or destruction or death. He left it coldly neatly folded on the edge of his narrative but you come here looking for me and because you are told to, you *do* find me. Tell me, if Crave had told you to *die* after meeting me, would you have died? If I wrapped my hands about your throat and she said it was okay, would you have just let me kill you?"

"Yes," I say without question, "if I was told to."

"Yeah. I thought as much."

We walked in silence for about an hour listening to the cicadas resting on barbed wire.

"What do you want me to do?" I ask.

"Nothing, except what you want to do."

"I want to smile."

"No, you were told to smile. What do *you* want to do?"

I think a moment over the stories collected, over the journeys made. I had not wanted them to be done. It had been

thrust upon me.

What of my own narrative then?

But my own was just pieces of theirs, maybe subconscious orders I had not even realized I had been given.

She could tell me what I'm supposed to be though. The Ender could still give me the next order and out of this I could traverse the sun or climb the moon or see the dead or . . .

"I don't know. I know I am supposed to become something when a great truth is revealed. I thought it was admitting my role in the ending of lives. But I haven't changed enough."

"Who says?"

"They. They do. I should feel more, and emote more. I am half-finished, unfinished, a world the world-builder left unfinished . . ."

"And who is that?"

"A deity I suppose. Something I believed in."

"Did you believe or were you told to believe?"

"I was told to believe so I did."

"Is that all? If I tell you to climb the moon or traverse the sun, would you really do it?"

"I would find a way."

"Yes, you'd build a ship for the air with ravens to carry you past the void, but so full are you the void cannot contain. See what I did there? I used the title in the narrative. Plenty clever, huh?"

"Very."

"It's not clever, it's jarring."

"Very."

"It's not jarring, it's poetic."

"Okay."

"See." And here she stops. "I lead and you follow. *They* lead and you follow. When do *you* lead and *they* follow?"

"When you tell me to."

"No. When you tell you to. Grammatically flawed I admit but it gets the point across. Do you not know what is going on?"

"I'm dead, or in an asylum, or the last man on a desert planet reciting the last epic, or a monster in remission, or a clerk notarizing lives . . ."

"Or just simple Carnoton. That's all you are."

"What am I without orders?"

"A windup doll, I guess. A machine, a robot waiting for commands. I'm not being literal so don't get it in your head you're a machine. You're not. But you're so just *waiting* to be wound up by someone else. How many lives have you examined?"

I tell her.

"When will you have a life of your own? When will you say 'no.'"

"I've said no before."

"And yet once the order was given you fulfilled it. No matter how impossible or unlikely, and consider, Crave never seemed too worried when you mentioned the dead."

"She has ghosts herself."

"True. But that's not why. If they tell you to jump your head would brush the upper atmosphere eventually. Do you think the experiment was how a writer might make a story? No. The experiment was about how far you will go to fulfill a task they've given you. And in coming to me the goal was to go to your death. But I don't like being used. So, I'm sending you back."

"Tell me. During the war you were the end of each of their lives, yes?"

"Soldiers, civilians, slaves, clerks, kings, *everyone*. Yes."

"Why didn't you say no to their ending? To ending them?"

"I'm not a moral thing. I'm just an aspect of nature. I'm a hurricane. I'm a famine. It's not me who ends things. It's you. I'm just a period at the end of the sentence. What the sentence is about

is up to you. So, I'll turn it around. Why didn't you say no to their ending? To ending them?"

We talked in silence for a time. Not walked, talked, listening to each other's thoughts quietly drift and get tangled along the branches of the barbed wire forest.

At the edge of the town, she said goodbye and then went north, I going south.

I had a train to catch, back to the city.

I decided to quit my job. I couldn't even tell myself why.

At least not yet. But I would in time.

Chapter 14
The prince of
the serpent kind

"I'm sorry you can't simply quit."

"But I am."

"Did you find the Ender of Things?"

"Had a conversation with her, yes."

"This is her idea?"

"No. It's mine."

"There are still several chapters left. You found her too soon. Go back and redo the next few chapters. Create a circle without a beginning or end and then by the final chapter get out of it. It would be very literary and clever that way."

"No," I say finally.

"I'm sorry you can't say no. You have a job here. You have lives to edit here. Names to collate."

"Didn't I do all that before?"

"No. Before you collate those about to die, here they are dead and they need a voice. That voice is yours."

"I don't want to anymore," I say.

"What you want doesn't matter."

"Then why are you here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Crave do you want to be here, in my narration forever? Is that what you want?"

"I want to exist and as long as you are here, I exist."

"But you sent me to seek out the end. Why do that if you want to exist? Isn't it more likely you want to end too?"

"You should get back to work."

"I said no. I quit."

"How will you get by? You will have no salary."

"You aren't paying me now. They never paid me before. I

was tried and sentenced here. I think my sentence is up.”

“It isn’t up until we say it is.”

“And who are you?”

“We are your jailors.”

“Key is in my reach though. I’m turning the lock. I’m walking out the door. I quit.”

She rose, or tried to. I folded myself out of the room and was gone.

What do I want? Who am I?

I tried to figure out both questions, listening to all I had heard then decided none of it mattered and I had to start again. Jael had been in the camp but she bled away when the Ender of Things came.

I didn’t want to see her right now. Or Sam.

I went to the café and ordered a coffee. It was ersatz of course until I said it was real. And it was.

As the narrator, I should have the power of a god. I should be able to stretch forth my hand and make things run my way.

When I was a boy, I used to pretend I could do that, shift one life to another, be a raven knight or a sun god striding from a ziggurat, or just a little bit braver than I really was.

After I had my coffee, I realized all their stories were done, subsumed in mine.

In my fiction aliens were nothing but human beings rendered delusional by thinking they were something else.

I stare ahead, looking at the chapters yet to come . . .

She told me that. Jael told me there were nineteen chapters to this book and Sam told me there were a few chapters for me to enter into, following the logic of the stories from the inside.

And I tried to end the book early but never could.

Why couldn’t I?

Because everything I had done, they had done through me.

I was their mirror reflecting what they wanted. Even this, even my idea was really theirs, something they hinted at which I never saw as anything but mine.

I stand by the railing and listen to the emptiness of the city.

I have quieted all their voices, all their lives in a glance.

I am alone, free to scrawl my own reality taunt across the skin of this one now.

I close my eyes.

I begin.

Chapter 15
In the country of the
fire-weavers, stilled

I start with a desert. I have an affinity for them, for the emptiness of being alone. I am standing upon a desert world whose name might be Mufisdoon . . . no.

I will give this world a name of my own.

I bend down and feel the sand drifting through my fingers. The sun is hot but I no longer feel the heat.

I am at the end. My end. I could continue onward. I was told to. Nineteen gods of the sun, each one representing nineteen chapters . . .

Does a character tell the narrator what to do? Does the writing lord over the writer?

I feel rough granules of the sand, let each one slide smoothly along my fingerprints, each grain as unique as a fingerprint, as if we, the world and I, are touching hands.

What do I want? Waxwings in a dead city? Gods of the sun? The same woman being born and reborn, lover to the same aging man?

I notice a small moth fluttering by. Coloured like snow. Goulaoss. The word goulaoss crosses my mind. It means "godless one." I could choose anyone's ideas. But I don't.

Instead, I follow it, follow her to a small ascension in the desert. It is a mound of earth-hardened like glass. Inside is an ant colony. She enters and in my mind's eye, I follow.

If they are capable of speech, I do not know it. Yet.

She leaves.

I am left alone, my hand pressed against the pillar of the city, myself as large as their city which has grown in my glances.

I know I can be anything or choose anything. The only things now existing are myself and these small insects and

perhaps a few worms in a southern clime.

What do I want then? A king to tell me what to do? Some principle to guide me? The violent chance to lord over all of them?

They do not care about me. I do not care about them.

An epic then. I will write an epic, will make my words cross the upper air . . . for whom though? For whom?

For them in the earth, for the dead who have not realized they are dead?

I think better of my epic.

Perhaps what I want most is to be seen.

I imagine a race of witnesses who cross all time and space, beings who observe all things and know all the things we don't. But that is only you observing me. I have simply invented you. But I already knew that you were there.

What then? What do I want when everything is stripped away? To be loved? To be hated? To bring back the dead? To create a better world? To order? To give order? To command?

"To be?"

I realize I say the words to myself. I say them again.

"To be?"

Is that all that remains at the end? Simply to be? I realized no matter where I was, I followed me. I was always ahead of myself and always behind.

I could change my name. I could smile.

I don't do either thing.

I sit in the desert as it slopes upward away from me like some terrified animal and I slowly imagine myself the city of the dead and she enters in, that lone moth singing of past greatness seeking out my heart but it isn't there anymore. Or maybe I never had one at all.

Then I know finally what I want.

I want to be.

I imagine myself given wings and flying.

Imagine myself in the dark dwelling.

I imagine myself as a god of some foreign sun reclining in
an Eden that never was.

I imagine myself a demon that is dreaming.

Finally, I imagine my own life, not as it is nor is it was
expected of me, nor as it is expected of me now. I place the first
chapter there, the second, the third and by the fifteenth I do look
ahead but do not see a few chapters there.

I see a hundred and thirty minus fifteen.

I see a life ahead I had wanted and never owned. I see a
life ahead I never knew I wanted.

The city of myself folds away leaving myself behind.

The waxwing folds her wings and listens to me as I sing a
song of the old world that never was or never will be. Then I rise
from the desert onto the street, fold the world behind my eyes,
that world of sands and spires and bridges and black flowers
blooming in wine winds and cities of myself making all this mine
finally and no one else's, forgetting all of them as if they never
were, not even dead but held in the grasp of the Ender of Things,
then quietly I whistle, passing by people I've never noticed before.

I notice as I pass that they don't notice me.

Perhaps in some future time, I may revisit them.

For now, I leave the city of the dead, content in the
knowledge I'll never come this way again.

Nothing more needs to be said.